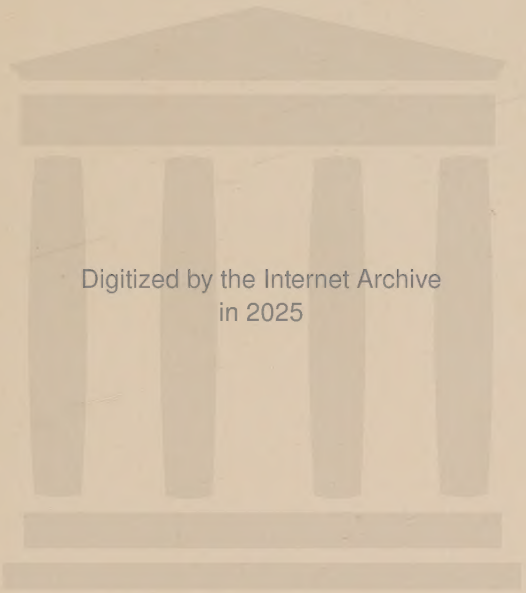
Mrs. Hope's Husband

Gelett Burgess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MRS. HOPE'S HUSBAND

Hadn't he come home several times lately to find Smither's silly black ribbons dangling over the teacups?

MRS. HOPE'S HUSBAND

BY

GELETT BURGESS

ILLUSTRATED BY
HENRY RALEIGH

NEW YORK
THE CENTURY CO.
1917

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Published September, 1917

Made in U. S. A.

TO

E. L. B.

FROM

G. B.

PARIS 1916-17

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

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I

WHO was she? Just another of the smart and daringly gowned guests invited by Mrs. Woodling? As she sauntered across the wide drawing-room floor, laughing and trifling so nonchalantly with her escort, her careless scarf artfully trailing off a white shoulder, all eyes followed her. Bored, stiff gentlemen awoke; laughing ladies suddenly ceased their chatter; some of the more discerning began to wonder. Who *was* she? Was n't she almost too charmingly distinguished for a mere millionaire?

But when, fine eyebrows lifted, she held out a graceful white-gloved hand and exchanged the first bright smiles with her eagerly welcoming hostess — no longer was there any question about it. Indubitably she was the lion of the evening.

But the gentleman who accompanied her, so tall and dark and picturesque, so gracefully erect, with that queer unreadable smile — was he famous, too? By the fine intellectuality of his face — yes, possibly. And yet, aristocratic and interesting as he seemed, was n't he a little ill at ease? That defensive reserve — was n't it somewhat overdone? Alas, probably not a celebrity. Feminine eyes were already deserting him. As his bland, bejeweled hostess greeted him with her second-best smile — oh, no, certainly not a celebrity! Only a husband. Glances, disappointed, returned to the lady.

Round the elaborately paneled room, the gilded, mirrored room, frescoed, columned and Louis Quatorzed, the guest of honor's name came out in whispers.

" Mrs. Hope," poet informed banker, backed up against the wall. " Mrs. Hope," the inquisitive rosy débutante murmured to her lorgnon-peering, white-haired dowager mama on the gold settee. " Why, *you* know — Pauline Hope, the novelist! " Aigrettes nodded, jewels flashed, pink-powdered shoulders leaned to crinkling white shirt fronts. " Yes, yes, of *course;* she wrote that wonderful, romantic —

why, what *is* the name of it, now? . . . stunning, is n't she!" And before the buzzing flutter had subsided, Mrs. Woodling, expensive and expansive, had bubbled through the first effervescence of her amenities; proudly she had passed her prize along. "A rare, exotic curiosity of my own private collection," she seemed to smile: "inspect, admire!"

"Oh, I just *loved* it, Mrs. Hope!" virginal voices petted her. . . . "Perfectly fascinating!" . . . "So adorably romantic!" . . . "Oh, it must be simply *wonderful* to write!" how the blue eyes beamed! . . . "I suppose it just drips off your pen, Mrs. Hope, does n't it?" . . . "Oh, I do wish you 'd put *me* in a book, some time!"

And thus, as one after another flatterer was brought up to talk with Mrs. Hope — or talk at her — and her husband, elbowed aside with careless "beg pardons," gradually edged off toward the wall — the season's literary favorite graciously accepted her homage.

How smiling she was, how affable! As Pauline Hope the novelist she may have winced at times as the inevitable glib inanities gushed for her; but Pauline Hope was not only a nov-

elist, she was a woman. Any shrewd observer — such as her frowning, proud husband, for instance, seeing what only a suffering lover can see — might have suspected that this first full taste of social success was refreshening her very soul. With what histrionic zest she was throwing herself into the part of handsome-and-accomplished! — with what modest depreciation, too, of her fame!

But if her pose was woman-easy, her husband's, obviously, was hard. High though his chin was held (suspiciously high, even), he withdrew more and more into himself as he withdrew from the ignoring crowd. Almost cynically he watched her till at last she was captured from the Philistines by a pair of enormous tortoise-shell spectacles and a pointed beard. He smiled as the editor Peever — the classic, stoop-shouldered Peever — claimed her as his lawful prey; for, in that crowd, even Peever could not hold her long. From the atmosphere of diamonds and dollars she was soon borne away in triumph to a rarer, loftier air, breathed by an inner circle of intellectuals, birds of a still finer feather. These, as ambitious Mrs. Woodling fondly cooed, had all

"done something"; and here Pauline Hope was, henceforth, to shine.

Over her bared white shoulder, "Follow me, Lester, follow!" her backward, questing glance had seemed to call. Oh, yes, she wanted him, no doubt. But what, in the name of all these snobs and toadies, was the use? Well he knew, by this time, what brand of patronage — snubs or worse — to expect of them. He was sensitive, he was fine-grained — and he was married to a celebrity. He was "Mrs. Hope's Husband!"

In the companies where they had appeared together since her first public recognition, he had, so far, endeavored to hold his own with dignity. But now his pride had begun to revolt. This evening, as he was removing his coat, upstairs, he had been introduced to a bearded and spectacled professor, only to hear, "Ach, Mr. Hope! Not de huspant of our so-distinguished friend Pauline Hope de novelist, yes?"

He still loved his wife; he was proud of her success. But that he himself should have to pay for it so dearly he had never anticipated. Why should he submit any longer to being

treated as a nonentity? Nonentity! Why, was n't it worse even than that? To-night, he could n't be even simply Lester Hope. Other men, respectable and otherwise, with brains and without, seemed here to be willingly accepted at their face value. He, however, with a professional record of which he was in nowise ashamed, was only "Mrs. Hope's Husband!"

Yet, while he was present at such congregations of tuft-hunters, escape seemed impossible. Even as he stifled his pride and brooded, nervously twisting his mustache and the little tuft on his lower lip, watching the universal adulation of his wife, Mrs. Woodling, like a somnambulist, glassy-eyed, obsessed with a fixed idea, was bearing magnificently down upon him with a large lady in tow. Stoically he awaited.

Ah, yes, it came—"Mrs. Poppity, I want you to meet 'Mrs. Hope's Husband'!" The blow accomplished, his hostess, smiling, oh, so sweetly smiling, slipped away.

The round-eyed matron in black satin was as soft and silly as only a huge woman in black satin can be. Fan lifted, gazing at him dreamily, "And what do *you* do, Mr. Hope?" she

Said Lester Hope: "I'm an attorney at law"

breathed; "ah, something *won*-derful, I 'm sure!" And then, waiting for no answer, her round, near-sighted eyes rolled away to the other side of the crowded room, where Pauline reigned.

Lester Hope looked at her, and looked in no kindly mood. Said Lester Hope, "I 'm an attorney-at-law."

Surprised and shocked, the round eyes suddenly returned, as if for explanation of a jest too subtle for her brain; and then, embarrassed, she began to prattle very hurriedly. But when she got down to rheumatism and the weather, he finished her off with the excuse that his wife was again beckoning him, and if Mrs. Poppity *would* pardon him, he really must — As he left, her relief, apparently, was as large as his.

Toward Pauline, however, he did not, could not, go. Under the sparkling crystals of a chandelier, surrounded by men, he caught sight of her, flushed and radiant. A shock of musical black hair was being emotionally shaken beside her; she was attended by Poetry (with a broad, black silk ribbon depending from his eye-glasses), as she collogued Drama, fierce in

a red mustache, and dry, whiskery Architecture.

Lester watched her pensively. Well, she was happy; she had "done something." Delightedly she was receiving the Right Hand of Fellowship as a new-comer to Fame. There, he too should be, longed to be, with those choice spirits, the brains of New York. But be with them as a mere appendage he could not. He had no "tag" to his name — except that damnable, that humiliating one that still rang in his ears like the tin can on a dog's tail — "Mrs. Hope's Husband!" wherefore, his pride compelled him to lurk on the ragged edges of intellectuality, the limbo of half wits.

From the pompous prattle of a lank youth who *would* criticize plays (but could n't write them), and a jolly big broker with a gold tooth who had just published an almost-original "Life of Napoleon" (at his own expense), he turned, resignedly, to slip the pale graces of Helen Ramsay, a mildly literary friend of a certain age — the age that has known one at college, and feels privileged to whisper, "I say, Lester, we never thought, in those days when you were an editor and carrying off all

the prizes, that you 'd have a wife who 'd be more famous than you were, did we!"

Mrs. Woodling, however, was one of those busy hostesses. It was against her principles to let any one linger long with a congenial soul; wherefore Helen's green ear-rings and lavender and lace were soon escorted away through the throng to meet a more appropriate guest.

Lester Hope nursed a sardonic smile. It was quite all right, of course. What damned him, apparently, amongst these New York ink-worshipers, was merely that his name was not printed in the papers or between covers. What were the intricate cases he had argued before the Supreme Court compared with her magazine stories? Could his reputation at the bar hope to compete with the thrill of her elderly lovers, and meek self-sacrifices, and mistaken identity? Helen Ramsay, of course, was "famous." She "really must meet" What 's-his-name.

"Oh, Mr. Hope!" came a thin feminine voice in his ear. Ten thousand dollars' worth of emeralds confronted him, strung on a skinny neck. An aged head was grinning. "How proud you must be of your wife, to-night, Mr.

Hope! Such a privilege, I'm sure, for us poor, matter-of-fact souls to be associated with Real Brains!" And it came out, in smirks and simpers and amiable wrinkles, that My Daughter Pearl was also literary, Mr. Hope. She too had real brains. It was, oh, it *was* too bad, Mr. Hope, that he could n't have heard a paper that My Daughter Pearl had written for our Fortnightly!

Held by her emeralds and her eyes, he was rescued only by supper; and as the faint odor of sizzling lobster called her joyously away, another provocative perfume brought its message to his own nostrils. So, toward the altar of masculine peace he wandered, musing his insignificance, to burn his incense at her shrine whose aromatic sweetness makes all men brothers.

In a remote corner of the billiard-room, where a few men, almost as disconsolate as he, were fingering their watch chains and yawning sulkily, he sat down to inhale, with his cigarette, a few pungent truths.

Was it possible that he could be envious of the attention his wife was receiving? Conscience indignantly answered, No. To be sure,

he had some contempt for the silly fulsomeness of the tribute paid, in such places as this, to literary achievement; but if Pauline, a little romantic in her illusions, cared for that sort of thing, well, had n't she honestly earned it? But why — why should he be made the sport of fools? Potentially, at least, he considered himself quite the intellectual equal of any of those whom his wife found so brilliant, and, "Really worth while, Lester!" Not a whit was he overpowered by the roaring lions of the Woodling *salon*. What, then, was wrong? Half amused, half contemptuous, he glanced about at the burlesque side-show of Mrs. Woodling's intellectual circus.

Across the room cards flipped on a table; and some one said, "*Hearts!*" But the man beside Lester still gazed silently at the portrait of a dead pheasant on the wall. Beyond him, other moody gentlemen were lost in their highballs. He could n't understand it. Why, he had never been left out of it like this before! He had never failed to be sought and welcomed — much less failed even to be considered. What was wrong?

From where Lester sat he saw, slantwise

through the portières, a strip of the flowery, red velvet hall, where violins sobbed plaintively to an accompaniment of babbling voices not at all plaintive, as brilliant couples passed and repassed. Suddenly, for one bright moment he saw — Pauline! — Pauline, in her gold-hued silk, lovely with pearls, smiling up at a handsome blond portrait painter with a Vandyke beard. She looked about a moment, as if for her husband — and was gone.

How vivid she was, to-night, gleeful with victory! But as he sat there smoking reflectively, his mind drifted off to another world — to those days before Fame had found her. . . . Had n't she been even more adorable then? . . . That little pink dimity frock . . . how proudly she had told him . . . "only seven cents a yard, Lester,"— and she had made it all herself! . . . Pauline Forr! Romantic, engaging Pauline-of-the-Violets! . . . How rapturously she had seized them from his hand, that day! "Oh, Lester! *Think* of it, Lester! Violets in January!" How she had kissed them —"Oh, you darling little rascals!"— kissed them, kissed —

"Damned bore!" grunted the man beside

him, lighting still another cigar, and beginning on his seventh glass of whisky. "Lord, I despise these confounded affairs!"

The shrugged shoulders of Lester Hope unintentionally endorsed the sentiment.

"Lots of good-looking women, though. Here, waiter, bring me another Scotch! Say, that Mrs. Hope's rather clever, I expect, is n't she? Pretty, anyway. Meet her?"

"Oh, yes." But Lester Hope's cigarette had accidentally dropped.

"What 's her husband like? Know him?"

Lester hesitated. "Oh, yes,— fairly well."

Uncomfortable and alarmed, he had started to rise to make his escape; but the man was holding him with a twinkling, alcoholic eye.

"He must feel pretty cheap, I should think, tagging along after her. Here, try one of these *Vencedoras.*" He yawned and hiccoughed behind his hand, and grinned, "Lord, if *my* wife had beat me out like that, damned if I would n't stay at home." Twisting his perfecto in his mouth he began to chuckle.

"Say — reminds me of a vaudeville team fellow told me about once. Wife used to do a heavy acrobatic stunt and practised seven

hours a day; earned two hundred a week. Mr. Husband stood in the wings for twenty minutes, twice a day, handing her the 'props.' Then he 'd go round to the nearest saloon and brag about 'Our Act'!" Poking Lester in the side with his thumb, he added, "Say, this chap Hope 's probably about like that, eh?" He laughed reflectively, unctuously.

As a horrified guest plucked at the joker's sleeve and whispered something which made him sit up, sobered, and mutter, "Good God! He *is?*" Lester Hope retreated to the drawing-room, blushing hot with shame, but at last thoroughly awakened.

He had his answer, now. Why, if he had grown so negative and insignificant that a man could assume from his mere appearance that he was a nobody — well, he must have fallen a good deal below par. Why should *he* have crawled away and hidden amongst these merely Husbands? What the devil had *he,* Lester Hope, to be ashamed of? Was n't it manlier, after all, to swagger about "Our Act," than to sneak off with his tail between his legs?

Yes; he was making more of a fool of himself than they were of him. Either he should

swallow his infernal pride and be honestly, openly proud of his wife, or else stay decently at home and let the Mrs. Poppitys of this foolish bookish world forget him.

And before he had left that swarming house that night that was what Lester Hope had firmly decided to do.

II

"MRS. HOPE'S HUSBAND!" For days, to the confusion of every other idea, the phrase had rung in his ears. "Mrs. Hope's Husband, Attorney-at-Law," he seemed to read at the top of his office stationery; and, at the bottom he had all but written, "Yours truly, Mrs. Hope's Husband." Every bookstore he passed called out to him, "Mrs. Hope's Husband!" That miserable ghost of his mortified self had worked and walked home with him. Nor did it leave him even there. Once the key was turned and the door of his smart little Georgian house, opening, showed the hall, trim and elegant with its white woodwork and curling stairway, lo, the specter was ready, awaiting him.

That specter, seated mockingly upon the floor, was a huge package wrapped in brown paper. It was the regular, fat, monthly offering of books from Peever, her publisher, addressed to "Mrs. Pauline Hope." "But why

the devil not 'Mrs. Lester Hope'?" he questioned sulkily. On a tray was the usual pile of letters. The envelopes were almost all addressed also to "Mrs. Pauline Hope"; as if, indeed, she were already a widow!

Depressed, his aristocratic appearance already a little dimmed, he went into the long, low library. Those rows of books and books had often sheltered him in a port of peace. But to-night his own books reproached him.

Sighing, he listlessly took up the evening paper. His eyes, after a while, fell upon the society notes. Yes, there it was! At the very end of a list of "those present" at the Woodling reception he read: "Miss Helen Ramsay, Mr. Saul Tremlett, and Mr. L. Hope, the husband of the distinguished novelist." The paper sailed across the room. Surely it was high time for him seriously to consider his problem!

"Mrs. Hope's Husband!" He — Lester Hope! Long he sat and pondered it. He, with his high pride — a mere possession! How had he ever become so negative, he who had so often been called magnetic!

Was it just another of the many comic trage-

dies of the too-early marriage — one partner going on and the other lagging behind in arrested development? Bang! His fist came down on the table. *No!* Downtown he was positive enough. Men respected him, admired him; and women had shown him favor. He felt strength in him. He was not one of those timid mortals whom success had never touched. At college, in the polo field, and before the bar he had proved it. Yes, in his own way he too had won. But he had n't happened to win in hers.

Spontaneously, out of the past, a picture came — a day in their first suburban home when she had been so happy that she had been almost afraid it might not last. With what devoted courage she had said, " Promise mé, Lester, let us promise each other that if the time should ever come when our love changes ever so little, we will be honest with each other! "

Would that time ever come? Was it, perhaps, even now well on the way? Could this new success of hers possibly separate them? And if it did, would she be honest, would she tell him? . . . Like a warning, the ringing,

ringing of a bell awakened him from his revery.

"Hello! Yes . . . yes." He had gone across to Pauline's desk and taken up the telephone. "No, she 's not at home yet . . . I don't know . . . Yes, probably." Then, his face clouded and he smiled bitterly. "Yes, this is 'Mrs. Hope's Husband.' . . . Very well, Mrs. Tremlett, when she comes in." The receiver struck the hook with a whang. Even in his own home he could n't escape!

Well — his wife, he recalled, was that afternoon reading from her own "works" at some precious woman's club. There was, as usual, "something on" for the evening — something of Peever's contriving, with people, of course, who had "done something." But Lester Hope had decided not to be there; and he anticipated a rather bad quarter of an hour breaking the news to Pauline.

After she had come laughing home, however, and, with an impulsive kiss, had joyously invited him up to her pretty, feminine, blue-chintz room while she dressed — combing, manicuring, gossiping of her female adorers of the afternoon, and, "Where *is* that cold cream?" — her lips saying, "Oh, but. Lester,

those women were *too* absurd, really," while her eyes were confessing, "How I love their praise!" — he found his excuses for his absence that night accepted, as she gazed at herself in the mirror, with a careless, "I 'm *so* sorry, dear, you can't go!"

And at dinner, later, with her pile of letters at her plate, as she took, first, a spoonful of celery soup, and then a taste of buttered flattery from some unknown correspondent — chattering on over her fish of how Helen Ramsay had inquired for him, and "Heavens, *another* request for an autograph!" — enthusiastically attacking her roast, seasoned with "Think of advertising *me* as the most beautiful authoress in the United States!" but, with the olives, only nibbling abstractedly at "Could n't you really manage to go with me, darling — or come for me later, dear?" and "Oh, what *is* this?" as she read another "lovely" review of her book, kindling and glowing, so pleased with life and art — Lester Hope smiled to think with what ironic ease the scenes often pass off that one has most dreaded.

He was working on an important case, he had told her, and she accepted his explanation

without suspicion. Was n't she, in fact, a little too ready to accept it? Did n't she change the subject rather abruptly to the fact that her name was in the new edition of "Who 's Who?" And, while she ran on about having her portrait painted by Willyer, and her election to a woman's fashionable club, Lester Hope sat thinking. Why was he so perturbed? After all, was n't it natural enough and pardonable enough that all this flattery and hero-worship should turn her head a little?

But every day he grew more depressed. So far, he had felt only the pin-pricks to his pride; but now a steady heart-ache began to oppress him. More and more her career seemed to be alienating them. Undoubtedly if he had spoken of it, she would have said that it was only his fault. If he *would* stay at home nights, or work late at the office instead of accompanying her, how could *she* help it? Nevertheless, he noticed that she urged him less and less to go with her.

There were, of course, dinners she gave at home, ordeals which he had perforce to attend. He could n't always have "business in Boston," or "an important conference in Phil-

adelphia." At his own table he roused himself with an effort to be agreeable to the Peevers and Woodlings, to joke affably with writing persons, from the latest visiting Briton to story-tellers of the Helen Ramsay type. With an occasional guest, such as the handsome portrait painter, Willyer, who, thank God, did n't scribble, he got on sympathetically; but his hospitable efforts in the rôle of Mrs. Hope's Husband usually exhausted him. The minor celebrities were over-polite, treating him as something between an old family servant and a precocious boy. The higher stars of literature drank his wines, they smoked his cigars, they were assiduous to his pretty wife. But her husband they jovially ignored.

Down to the library, one evening, came Pauline in a bewitching new gown — one of the extravagances for which she was now paying herself. Never had he seen her so beautiful, he thought, as when she walked into the room and threw down her tulle scarf. What a change from the slender lines of her budding youth to this regnant lady blooming to-night in

perfect flower! His wife? It seemed impossible!

The jewels on her bare throat sparkled; and as she critically selected her orchids under the Wingèd Victory, Lester Hope saw as never before what success had done for her. Letting his pen fall, he watched her. No, ah, no longer was she Pauline Forr, the naïve, romantic, talented girl, the wayward darling he had first loved and molded. Could Pauline Forr ever have handled those orchids so calmly? Pauline-of-the-violets! Nor was she any longer that young Mrs. Hope, that fresh, suburban Mrs. Hope, so proud of her husband, her home, her position. Oh, no; young Mrs. Hope, before this, would have had her arms about him, petting him, teasing him, pulling that obstinate lock of hair — God, how he remembered — so whimsically affectionate!

The orchids were arranged in her corsage; the orchids were rearranged. There was a reconnoitering glance; then, "Could n't you possibly come with me, dear, this time?"

He stiffened, and shook his head.

"I 'd particularly like you to, to-night, Les-

ter. It 's horrid going alone." She laid her hand gently on his arm. "Of course I know it may bore you, but —"

God, how he wanted to seize that hand, seize her as he used to, and crush her in his arms! But his demon of pride forbade. Instead, he turned to his papers uneasily. "No," he said, dully, "I 'm sorry, but I 've got some writing to do."

There was a moment's wait; then, with a toss of her head, her expression changed. Chin up, shoulders back, splendid as a countess was Pauline Hope. Oh, there was no changing her pose, now; it was quite evident that it would last all the evening — and more than one would ask, admiringly, "Who *is* that over there, that proud-looking creature, with the dark hair?"

As the front door closed on her, Lester Hope rose wearily. To-night, for the first time — yes, for the very first time — he really wanted to be alone. He looked about. Good God — *alone?* — why, the whole room seemed fairly filled with her brilliant, eclipsing personality. Did n't everything in it suggest her? She dominated him still.

Out went an electric light, and her writing desk disappeared into the gloom. Shrouded in that shadow too, her framed photographs of authors and "presentation copies" no longer accused him of his own conspicuous lack of fame. He turned another switch, and another, drowning more evidences of her new, public prosperity — those rare editions she was so proud of, her prints, her paintings, and all that made the place so appallingly literary — until at last he was safe in a little yellow oasis of light at his own desk. Safe? Ah, still in the shadows the specter lurked. "What are you going to do with *me?*" it seemed to say. "I am Mrs. Hope's Husband!"

And yet — it was not as "Mrs. Hope's Husband" that he had gone so brilliantly through college; it was not "Mrs. Hope's Husband" who had won with dash and skill on the polo field; and when men talked of the stars of criminal legal practice his successes had never been set down to "Mrs. Hope's Husband." Surely there was some personal force in him. No, what people had said was that Lester Hope was magnetic; that he was a good fighter; that he never quit. They said also that his

force was heightened by his picturesque and distinguished appearance, for, so tall and dark, with his twisted mustache and the little tuft on his chin, with his long sensitive hands, he looked more like a French count that a New York lawyer. Now, alone in his library as he paced, absorbed, he showed something of that old vigor; but well he knew that, once Pauline had returned radiating her new prestige, that positive personality of his would again fade and dwindle.

The dull blue portières were parted. A maid looked into the room.

"There 's a package come for Mrs. Hope, sir," she said. "Could you sign for it? The man 's awful particular about it, but he said if she was n't in, Mrs. Hope's Husband would do." She left without noticing the cheeks of the self-controlled man who had handed her back the receipt book. They were burning as hotly as if she had struck him in the face.

As he opened and shut the drawers of his desk, thinking dispiritedly that he must go to work, he paused, staring at something — something ragged, worn, soiled.

He drew it out. What queer, stutteringly

printed words, what irregular spacing and erratic margins. Hyphens and capital letters strewn in reckless profusion, words crossed out, words written in, careted and blotted — well he knew those pages! Again he seemed to be talking over those early tales of hers with her, arguing their psychology, elaborating their romantic plots. Why, they had sat up talking them over excitedly, night after night together, often till two or three in the morning! Together! — where was that "togetherness," as she used to call it, now?

He laid the manuscript gently down . . . Pauline . . . Pauline! . . . How he had worked with her! Heart and brain, how he had fought for her! . . . He could n't help it, damn it, the tears would come. . . . Once he had inspired her — once he had taught her — that was all over. For a while his education and his man's experience had led her, but her technique had soon caught up with her creative talent. Yes, she had caught up with him, too, and passed him on the road. And now, apparently, she needed him no longer.

Well, even if he had lost her, or was, apparently, fast losing her, did n't that word "hus-

band" mean at least that he had won her once? Lost! — why lost? Had n't he lost cases before, in the lower courts, only to win them in the end doggedly on appeal? Why, then, should n't he demand a retrial in this case, the greatest case of his life, and try to win *her* back again? But *how?* His mind began to seek back and forth furiously on the scent, as it often did downtown when he seemed to be beaten. How? How? Was a second romance ever possible between married lovers? Was it? Was it? It seemed absurd, yet the thought stimulated him.

How? How the devil — *how?* Gazing at the rows and rows of books that lined the walls, wandering, wondering through "if only" and "there must be *some* way!" his fancy quested until — he had no idea how long he had been sitting there, scowling, chewing his cigar — he came briskly to himself, apostrophizing the shadowy Wingèd Victory with the savage exclamation, "Why not?"

Others had done it; why not he? Did n't they still come continually, come by dozens sometimes, those confounded letters, those friendly letters, foolish letters, fulsome, flat-

tering, from unknown correspondents? How interestedly they had both read them, at first, discussing the writers, analyzing the characters they revealed! How proud she still was of them, too! He smiled . . . Pauline at her desk, opening her letters complacently, sucking the last drop of praise from every one. . . .

Yes, and she would read his, too. Perhaps, though, she might not answer it. A frown. But why not compel her to answer it? A smile of pride. He had invention, many had called him clever; could n't he play on her curiosity, her passion for romance? After all, Pauline was still a woman, and he was still a man. What were men's wits for, anyway, but to conquer women? And his wits were supposed to be trained in practical psychology; why not prove them? And, at least, one sharp weapon was left to him; its name was Mystery.

By the Wingèd Victory of Samothrace, he 'd do it! At that moment any woman would say, and most men think, that Lester Hope was handsome. There was a new strength in the gesture with which he tossed back his black hair. Had Pauline come in upon him at that moment — But she did not come in.

Of course the letter would have to be typewritten to conceal his identity. A mere detail — that of course could be done next day at the office. Let 's see — he would give for his address a new post-office box; and he would sign it — what? Long he studied before he chose — " John Irons." Long, long he reflected, more absorbed than ever he had been in a criminal case, smoking on, smoking on, before he had, lawyer-wise, decided with a new smile upon Pauline's vulnerable point and where the line of least resistance to his flattery lay.

And so, crossing to the bookshelves to turn the pages of her novel thoughtfully, back to his desk with it, lost in his plan, scribbling furiously — walking the floor — sitting down, finally, to copy all carefully, deliberately, Lester Hope did not realize, till at midnight he heard the front door opening, that for two whole hours he had forgotten that he was " Mrs. Hope's Husband."

III

IT is a fact, although some unmarried women may not know it, that trimming a mustache is one of the few small vanities a self-respecting man permits himself to practise before the mirror consciously, seriously, and unashamed. Lester Hope, with puckered brow, was trimming his mustache. A knock — a knock at his wife's door. Eight thirty-five. Ah, her breakfast — *and* her mail! Smiling, but a little excited, he laid down his scissors. The new trial had begun. Anxiously he awaited Pauline's opening for the defense.

It was not long, however, before her gay soprano, "Lester! oh, *Lester!*" brought him strolling into her room, to find her ambushed in laces and ribbons in her four-poster, propped up luxuriously amongst the pillows. She was drinking her chocolate. Smiling consciously, he waited. Many, many were the witnesses he had cross-examined, and well he knew their

carefully-careless look. But this time that look was on his own face.

"Say, Lester," she began, "remember what fun we had about all the people who congratulated us on our engagement? Remember Quivin, Les?"

"Why, yes. Heard from Quivin?"

"No. But just think of his saying to you, that time, 'Well, I *hope* you 'll get along well with her!' But that showed that Quivin *did n't* get along any too well with *his* wife, did n't it? And that snippy Nell Tremlett, too!"

"Oh, heard from Nell?"

She shook her head with impatience. "Don't you know, though, Nell said, 'Well, you 'll find it very *different,* Pauline, after you 're married!' — and that told *her* story. Why, your cousin Ned — no, I have n't heard from Ned, Lester; don't be so nervous! — he was the only one, apparently, who was happily married. 'Good for you, Les, it 's the only way to live!' — remember?"

Watching her sharply, he nodded. "Yes, of course; what of it?"

"Why, only this: each one of them was un-

consciously expressing his subconscious mind," said Pauline, decidedly. "According to modern psychology one's dominant traits must inevitably come out in one's talk or one's writing. A penurious person — is n't he always talking about money, and a vain person of people's looks?"

"Yes, my dear,"—Lester smiled at his cigarette. "Also the earth is round, and slightly flattened at —" but his eyes were suddenly attracted by the yellow sheet with which she was now gesticulating. That squarish, yellow sheet he had chosen purposely that he might recognize it at a glance.

"See here," she said, "I 'd like your opinion of this. I think it 's rather clever, myself. It 's from one of my latest admirers." Bridling, she turned it over and looked at the signature. "'John Irons,' whoever *he* is. Listen to this, though: *Tiny, small, delicate, wee, darling, diminutive, little* — and so on. Look at that long list of words, will you? All taken, if you please, from one chapter of my novel. See? Friend Irons infers, from the tendency shown in that unconscious way, that I am fond of little things — toys, carvings, and minia-

tures, and *bibelots,* etc. Well — that 's all true enough. Why, he 's deduced my whole wonderful exquisite character, in fact, from my vocabulary."

Now, as she re-read the letter, he wondered, for a moment, if he had made any mistake that might have betrayed him. She was chuckling.

"'Dusky gold!'" she laughed. "'Dusky gold!' Yes, I remember I *was* rather pleased at that. *Opalescent, sheen, velvety-bloom, smoky-red, virginal, gossamer, floaty, filmy, diaphanous* — look, a whole procession of decorative words like that, marching right down the page. See? And here 's what John says in conclusion. Are you listening, Lester? 'An almost pathetic love of beauty; you must have been deprived of pretty things when you were young.' That 's right, too; I was, was n't I? 'Disliking discords in life and art.' H'm! 'Fond of admiration.' Well, who is n't?"

Lester walked to the window to hide his face from her. "What an ass!"

"Oh, I don't know, Les," her tone now was thoughtful. "'Loyal, while seeming to forget.' I don't see where he got *that!* But is n't it remarkable?"

"Sounds like the Baconian cipher, to me, picking out words to fit, like that. Why, you could prove almost anything, that way."

"But he happens to prove just exactly the things that are *true*. Why, he might have known me for years! Of course, he 's rather complimentary, too. He says — where *is* that? — oh— 'You must be the most charming woman in the world.' You need n't shrug your shoulders, Lester; perhaps I *am*. But wait a minute!" and she continued more slowly. "Hopes he 'may develop the acquaintance by some more direct means.'" Her embarrassed laugh did not conceal a serious interest. "What d' you suppose he intends by that? Meet him around the corner, or what? Would you answer him, Les?"

Lester yawned artistically. "Oh, if you feel like it. Lord, *I* don't know!"

"I don't know — either." As she spoke, abstractedly she kept folding and unfolding the yellow sheet. "I think sometimes you can really tell more about a person from a letter than — why, Lester, if I wanted to get a line on you d' you know what I 'd do? I 'd just go away, visit mother or something, and make

you write to me. I really believe I 'd find out more about you than by living with you for six months!"

And, though she drifted off in a description of last night's reception, her husband suspected, beneath her gossip of Mrs. Poppity's latest blunder, and how Smithers wished to dedicate his book of poems "To P. H.," a strong undercurrent of John Irons in her mind, which she seemed to be taking some pains to conceal. That forenoon Lester Hope walked downtown to his office not a little elated.

For three afternoons, each day a little less elated, he walked downtown only to be disappointed. But on the fourth day when he stopped at the post office and looked in as usual through the little glass door, behold, a pale blue envelope! It was addressed to "John Irons, Esq., P. O. Box 1711"— in Pauline's handwriting, bold and rapid.

Gingerly he took it out, feeling somewhat as if he were robbing the mails, and tore open the blue envelope. The sensation was, he thought, a bit too like eavesdropping on Pauline to be comfortable. Of course it was for him, that

letter; but at the same time it was n't exactly for her husband, was it?

Well, never mind; at a shelf-desk by the big, dirty window, hustled by the crowd, he found himself reading:

"*My dear Mr. John Irons:*

"I 'm so glad to have found at least one careful student of my book. Really, you quite remind one of those patient, laborious old prisoners in medieval dungeons who spent their days counting the number of 'the's' and 'and's' in the Bible. It was almost a pity, though, for you to have wasted so much time on my novel that might have been spent, might n't it? at a dollar a palm, with the gypsies."

Pauline went on in an almost gleeful strain to fear that she was n't *half* so nice as John Irons had made out, and that, really, if she were *honest* (which, of course, she *was n't*), she ought to insert a lot of brittle, magenta, sharp-pointed words into her next novel, just to make his pet theories consistent. In conclusion, (the note was short), she wondered Who he was.

There was altogether a dancing note of cordiality and frankness in it that rather surprised him; and a little something about it also that he — did n't — quite — like. Just why, he found it hard to decide. What, then, had he anticipated? Was n't it in just this way, inducing just this charmingly amenable mood, that he had expected to rewin her love? All he knew was that some Imp of the Perverse had touched him with a faint regret that he had succeeded so well. Did n't she, he thought, come almost too easily? The sudden revelation of her as she appeared secretly with a stranger was almost uncomfortable, even though that stranger were himself.

At the office, he found, after some search, the last letter he had received from his wife, when, two months ago, she had gone to visit her mother. It told of the weather, it told of the theaters, it told of the state of her health. Quite a contrast, it seemed to him, her letter to "Mrs. Hope's Husband" and that flirtatious note to John Irons — but the thought he shook off. After all, since he *was* John Irons, why not rejoice with John? This was the only way he knew to win her, and win her

he must! On with the masquerade! Jumping again into his new mental costume, he sat down to write his reply.

"So you wonder who I am? You will never, never suspect me." He stopped and gazed at his typewriter. Then the keys snapped savagely. "I am far too unimportant, and I am too proud to confess my name. I am not in your set, nor even in the brilliant circle of your acquaintance. We have met, it is true; but I have every reason to believe that you have forgotten me. But, my dear Mrs. Hope, though I have only just summoned courage to write to you, I have long, long admired you. And yet, bright a star as I see you, don't think me dazzled or afraid. I know your faults as well as your virtues. You have no greater friend, or severer critic — and remember that I am watching you all the time, in the dark!"

He continued in as spirited and daring a vein as he thought he might without frightening her away. Experience had taught him that when a woman is to be won she must be won quickly, while the game is new and exciting.

That night they had pork chops for dinner. Pauline asked if the coal had been ordered and the milk bill paid. She spent most of the evening in deciding which photograph, from a set of proofs, would be most effective in advertising a holiday edition of her novel.

Her next letter, because of two sly little words, amused him. "Aren't you forcing this a little?" came her mild protest. "As a reader of character I admit you are rather good, though I fear superficial. I have an idea, however, that I might perhaps do as well myself; but I haven't enough data, as yet, in *your* vocabulary to be able to deduce your character, and decide whether or not I care to continue the correspondence."

"As yet." Business forgotten, the telephone unanswered, in his office he thoughtfully rubbed his chin and smiled at those two words; then frowned. "I haven't enough data, *as yet!*". Why, couched though it was, woman-fashion, in the guise of a rebuke, wasn't it virtually an invitation to continue? Yes, she was distinctly encouraging. The battle was on.

And, daily, as it raged, for they now wrote

daily, there was at home, apparently, never anything more between them than a dinner table or the upstairs hall! Friends, partners, mates, roast beef and the "Evening Tribune" — plus invisible, clandestine romance! With every surreptitious glance he stole at her as she read, or wrote, or sang, he wondered what name to give to the domestic drama — Comedy or Tragedy?

Never before, possibly, had his office typewriting machine transcribed such jaunty messages as during these weeks when, evening after evening, he lighted the electric lamp and sat down alone to write to Pauline. Those stiff old wires and springs, habituated to "Yours of the 18th at hand," and "the party of the first part," must have felt an unaccustomed thrill as they jumped and rattled to the elastic words: *"If I could be near you, and see you and hear you, I'd probably fear you too much to confess what now I'm implying, (at least I am trying), and also relying on you, too, to guess!"*

So shrewdly, he eschewed the sentimental note. At lovers' fond perjuries they say Jove laughs; but Minerva, yes, and all Olympus,

will abet a courtship where grace and humor woo.

Hard work enough it was, too, with his wife drifting, drifting away, to force himself to the blithe pristine note of his early sweethearting; but he succeeded. He was sure of that when she responded a little more promptly than before, and quite in his own vein. How long, oh, how long it had been since his wife had written verses to him!

So nibble, nibble, nibble — and his fish was almost on the hook. His romantic bait had been just the thing for her fancy. At home, Pauline had casually mentioned the John Irons letters occasionally as they came, with a touch of amusement.

"Want to see it, Lester?" she would say, carelessly, as she skirmished through the magazines for a February number, containing her picture.

He displayed only the lukewarm interest of a sleepy spouse. "Oh, I guess not now, thanks; I'd like to finish this story I'm reading."

Show him her letters, would she? It was a harmless Platonic game, then — a family

"You were surrounded by admirers, and I could not, would not force myself on your notice!"

affair! He had no idea of carrying on a mere practical joke; his object was serious; to re-win her love, no less. So now if he were to land her, so to speak, it was time for a quick jerk to the line. He decided to try to write her so warm, so private a letter that, though she would accept it from an unknown admirer, she would not quite care or even dare to show it to her husband.

For this, a new touch of romance. And if there are still those who think a typewritten letter cannot breathe romance, they should have watched Pauline Hope (as, through her half-opened door, Lester himself, one morning, shamelessly watched her), studying his ardent lines.

"Always I shall think of you as once I saw you, in golden silk and pearls," he had written. "You were surrounded by admirers, and I could not, would not, force myself on your notice; though I watched you all the evening! But to-day I saw you almost more radiant on the street — with your husband. Yes, and I was, for a moment, very near you — I might have touched your hand! And I

knew, then, that I loved you! You wore no flowers, I am sure, and yet when you passed, I swear I breathed violets!"

Ah, love unadorned is common enough — but robed in mystery — mystery and mischief! Little wonder the situation caught her novelist's fancy. Yet, pause a moment, and observe the piquant picture; for, tapping away at the prosaic keys of his typewriter, it never occurred to Lester Hope to wonder which, after all, was the more romantic figure — his picturesque John Irons of fiction, following her dramatically in secret, or Mrs. Hope's Husband of fact, in blue worsted, in shirt-sleeves and green eye-shade, alone in his office after his clerks had gone, only the one desk lamp lighted, trying mercilessly to divide himself in twain and pit one against the other in the fight for Pauline.

It was the pile of unopened letters that lay on her flowery-fragrant breakfast table next morning that gave him his real result; amongst them he spied no square yellow envelope. Yet a square yellow envelope certainly *had* been on the tray when the mail was brought up to her

— he had assured himself of that when the maid passed him on the stairs.

Pauline rose, and Pauline dressed. Down the curly staircase, clad all in white, she came a-singing. A joyous kiss she threw — at Willyer's portrait of herself in the library. She scolded the dog, petted the cat, ordered veal cutlets for luncheon, talking gaily all the time.

The creaming and sugaring of her oatmeal, however, seemed to require more concentration. In silence, she took a few dainty spoonfuls. Then, thoughtfully: "Lester, d' you recall when I wore that yellow silk evening gown of mine last? At the Woodlings', was n't it? You were there, that night, at that first reception she gave for me, were n't you?"

"Why, yes —" he said; "what about it?"

"Oh, nothing." She looked up, caught his eye, suddenly looked down again. "I was just wondering if — if I 'd dare to wear it there again, that 's all." A pause. "Say, Lester; d' you remember who was there, that night? Now, don't be sarcastic — I mean,

was there any one there — well, that we knew, but had n't seen for a long time, for instance? Nobody of any importance of course. Almost a stranger, you might say?"

He appeared not to notice any hidden motive in her query, and with the stupidity of a doting, unsuspicious husband, he answered only, "No. Why?"

"Oh, I was only trying to think of — of whom to invite to . . ." Pauline dwindled off, and for a time there was no sound but the delicate click of her spoon against the plate, and the rustling of his newspaper.

"Say, Les; you know when we were walking downtown yesterday morning? You don't recall seeing any one particular, do you? — any one you knew?"

"Nobody — but the postman."

"That 's funny," Pauline murmured.

Yes, it was rather funny, he thought; but he did n't say so.

Over the top of his newspaper he watched guardedly as she tasted her porridge, waiting for her to mention John Irons. Never a word more did Pauline say.

But, when it came to it, why should she?

Happy as their married life had been, it was not established upon the theory of a private ownership of one by the other. They were both tacitly free to give or withhold their confidence. But one significant thing he did notice — that Pauline's farewell kiss was just a bit more clinging than usual. Was n't her conscience troubling her a little? he wondered.

And by just that extra amount of fervor in the demonstration, he suspected, Lester Hope had fallen, and John Irons had risen, in the scales of her affection.

IV

IN the weeks that followed, Lester's tête-á têtes with his wife grew ever rarer. To find a bevy of celebrities gossiping over Pauline's teacups when he came home was quite what he had to expect, nowadays; or else, perhaps, it would be old Peever ensconced with her in the library. Manuscripts and magazines, royalties, reviews — how sick Lester had grown of them! But when, by happy accident, he and Pauline did have dinner alone together, without literary ladies-with-three-names or blatant he-talkers, Lester was often tempted to hazard the careless question:

"Oh, by the way, Pauline, ever heard anything more from that Irons chap?"

But, as he leaned back in his chair, scrutinizing her thoughtfully, he would always wonder: What if Pauline should deny it? No, he feared to put her to the test. He, the husband, was still jealous of himself, the lover.

Still, she was friendly enough, too. She

was always considerate; outwardly, at least, she was affectionate. But somehow his wife — well, she seemed to be growing every day more like the fine portrait Willyer had painted of her — that handsome, that inscrutable, aristocrat in black velvet. And often, as he looked up at her, she seemed to smile ambiguously down at him from the library wall as if saying, "Well, I too have my secret." Her soul was fading from his ken.

The Lady of the Letters, on the other hand, was becoming ever more sharply defined. Nothing gives a woman a new lease of life like the discovery of an unsuspected Romeo, and the avowal of John Irons's love had lifted her spirits like wine. She was no longer merely Pauline; she was quite a new person, with all the charm of newness. But did n't she have also, thrilling him often, a charm that was old, familiar — long lost? Why, at times, in the exuberance of her letters she was almost Pauline-of-the-Violets!

Weaving in and out through the dreary technicalities of his business affairs, day after day, her friendly nonsense would dance through his head:

"At a mystery you really are an artist,
And your charming *incognito* is a game
That you handle with the grace of a Delsartist;
But I think you're quite too speedy, all the same!

"So the kiss that you beseech of me to post you
I refuse; for you must surely understand
That a lady does n't give a kiss, you ghost, you,
Till the gentleman at least has held her hand!"

Oh, it was easy enough, now, to sit down and begin, "My dear Pauline"; easy enough to jest with her on paper, easy enough to pique her curiosity and keep the romance at the bubbling point. "Yesterday, I saw you and followed you for blocks. At first, I could have killed every man who turned to look at you; afterwards I could have killed every man who did not. I wonder if you are as proud as you ought to be of that free graceful gait of yours?" Easy enough it was, in the neutral environment of his downtown office, alone, quiet, to forget for the nonce that he was "Mrs. Hope's Husband." . . .

What was hard was when he was at home with her; when he was watching her intently — watching Pauline the wife, that is — and

trying to discover in her Pauline the sweetheart.

"Why, Lester, what *is* the matter with you?" she would exclaim, sometimes, glancing up from her book. "You've been looking at me so queerly! What *are* you thinking of? I should think I were a total stranger!" And Pauline would laugh in A-sharp and Lester in D-flat, which, in domestic music, whether classic or modern, is a discord.

Harder still it was when Helen Ramsay called, and was coquettish.

"Aren't you looking rather fagged, Lester? You're not leading a double life, are you?" A wink at Pauline. "You can't tell much about Lester, you know; he was rather romantic, I found, when he was at college."

Hardest of all on his pride were the times when his wife, smoothly reluctant, explained that Peever was going to bring that English author to-night, you know, and she supposed they'd just talk books and books and, "Of course I'd *love* to have you, Les, but still, if you think you'll be bored—" She might as well have given him a stick of candy, and told him to go off and play by himself!

And, meanwhile — "How do you dare, you devil!" she was writing to John Ircns. "You know that I am married. Well, how do *I* dare? I don't know whether you are, or not; but, (is n't it awful!) I don't much care — as yet. I have to confess that you, my charming serpent, have quite fascinated poor timid bird Me. There 's something about you, plague take you, that makes me quite willing to trust you recklessly. I am even willing to run the risk of your thinking me (I 'm not) bold or credulous. Oh, J. I., I have simply searched my soul for phrases to explain why, somehow, I don't and simply *can't* feel guilty. I am reduced, actually, to the coy school-girl confession, 'I feel as if I had known you always'!"

And then — to come home, hungry for one look of that affectionate abandon in her eyes — to find her, so beautiful, so cool — oh, God, so suave — with her drawing-room full of Polish artists, varnished *mondaines,* hungry-looking poets, and be affably patronized as "Mrs. Hope's Husband!"

And so, Lester Hope having thus been introduced to the torture chamber, let him be

delicately tormented further to determine if he be domitable; or, if not, what lyric may be wrung from his distress.

Lying on the big leather couch in the library alone one night (and that is where Willyer should have painted him, a long, graceful figure, with a darkly picturesque head — how he would have made those Irish-blue eyes twinkle under the black lashes!) Lester Hope was wondering — wondering if, after all, he could ever bear it to win Pauline anew in this strange, unsatisfactory fashion. Was n't it even dishonorable; a sneaky trick on her, of which he should be ashamed? What would it prove, anyway, to make her fall in love with an unknown?

Suddenly there came a sickening thought. What if it *were n't* an unknown? What if she did know, or thought she did, who John Irons was? Scraps of a month-old conversation had come back to him.

"Lester, you remember Paul Smithers, don't you?" Pauline's question had been off-hand, as she was adjusting her hat before the mirror.

Oh, yes, Lester knew; Smithers was that poet-person — he of the black beribboned eyeglasses and the little black chopped mustache.

"Tell me," she had asked, carelessly — this was after J. I.'s first really daring missive — "do you think he is really clever, Lester?"

Lester, quite profanely, did not.

But, now he thought of it, had n't he come home from the office early several times, lately, to find Smithers's silly black ribbons dangling over the teacups, and Pauline gazing a bit interestedly into those owlish, tortoise-shell eyeglasses? When was it she had asked about him? Was n't it — yes, it must have been just after the day J. I. had written that letter about seeing her. By Jove, the poet *had* been "quite near enough to touch her hand!"

Lester groaned. What a fool he had been to mention that in his letter! Why, had n't he kept his John Irons invisible, detached, an insoluble mystery, instead of setting Pauline's romantic imagination to work trying to identify him amongst her acquaintances! Good God! Could it be that, writing his aching heart into those letters, he had been merely

playing into that pale poet's languid, effeminate hands?

Whereat, the preliminary pleasantries with the thumbscrews having been finished, his torturing fate now smilingly took up the red-hot pincers.

That week Smithers came to dinner. Smithers was elegant at dinner, with a patronizing, Harvard drawl, with all the airs of a genius, and a cigarette-holder seven inches long. A separate affront was in every goggled glance he gave Pauline, and every smile she sent him in return made Lester a little faint. Continually he kept saying to himself: "Well, at least Smithers can know absolutely nothing of the letters"; but it was small satisfaction, for, if Pauline really believed Smithers to be John Irons, her unconscious thought would instinctively encourage him. And Lester Hope, knowing him well, had seen at a first glance that small-eyed Smithers was scarcely one to be trusted with a complaisant woman.

And, so suffering, as he told his legal anecdotes, gallantly rallying Helen Ramsay as a beauty and blarneying enthusiastic, spluttery

Mrs. Woodling as he might a girl, laughing even at old Peever's monumental attempts at the jocose, Lester Hope never once lost sight of Smithers — talkative Smithers in his poetical black silk stock and soft, many-plaited, white silk shirt.

Was n't he a very cat-like, a very stealthy black-and-white creature whom it might be unpleasant to arouse? thought Lester, watching him, disgusted. Think of his wife playing with such an animal — it was horrible!

Now, Pauline had other admirers in her newly discovered intellectual world. They called, they dined, they danced. They sent their little books with the fly-leaves elaborately inscribed, they presented her with little bas-reliefs and statuettes, with little colored daubs signed prominently "*A mon amie.*" Smithers was but a sample of many who were beginning to flutter about her bright personality. But Smithers, as the most persistent and obnoxious of them all, Smithers the soft, Smithers the sticky, had become Lester's obsession. How *could* Pauline possibly endure him, he wondered bitterly. "I *must* get rid of Smithers!"

But, as things turned out, it was not Lester who got rid of him, after all; it was Pauline. Or, rather, Smithers rid them both of himself by a characteristic form of social suicide.

"I don't think I shall see much more of Smithers," said Pauline, one night, after coming home alone and cool-eyed from a reception to which the poet had escorted her. Smithers, it appeared from her subsequent reluctant confession, was not a gentleman and had not apparently considered her a lady. Smithers, in short had, in the cab — "Well, don't worry, Lester; you know you can always trust me to take care of myself and any possible impertinence."

White-hot with indignation though he was (and not without unpleasant suspicions that perhaps Pauline had quite unconsciously encouraged the beast), the elimination of Smithers certainly brought Lester a relief. Pauline now knew, of course, that Smithers was not the author of the John Irons letters; his vulgarity was incompatible with the romance as it had been played. Lester had a quick bound of spirits.

With that recrudescence of his first fresh

impulse he saw plainly now that it was not enough to get rid of Smithers; he must, so to speak, get rid of himself. Compunction for the husband was retarding the lover. No more regrets, then; no more reproaches; Lester Hope must be tossed bodily overboard to save John Irons.

The poor husband did not quite drown, however, until one day Lester came home to find, as he had often found of late, a vase of roses on the library table. At sight of the flowers he, as John Irons, had sent, he had, heretofore, always had an uneasy feeling of having robbed Peter to pay Paul. Not so to-day. Always before he had gingerly avoided the subject, trying to let Pauline off from any definite explanation.

But to-day he looked her in the face and asked outright: "Say, where the devil did this carnival of roses come from anyway?"

Instead of the hoodwinked husband's customary twinge of pain at her feminine evasion, he smiled indulgently at her embarrassed, "Oh, I got them this morning; are n't they pretty!" He felt only the lover's joy at getting ahead of a rival. Was n't that card with the "J. I." al-

"Where did this carnival of roses come from?"

ways missing? Pauline was already feeling guilty. What could be more encouraging?

But his respite was short; only just long enough to restore the victim sufficiently for him to feel the full force of his next keen agony. Fate had by no means exhausted the torturing possibilities of the situation; and fate, in grim earnest, now, laid him upon the rack for the *peine forte et dure*.

For, if you mingle contempt with jealousy, the pain is fairly easy to endure. One's native feeling of superiority soon heals the smart. Another week of Smithers and who knows how Lester's scorn of Pauline's taste might have affected his love for her? But, poison the wound with admiration, and jealousy has a deeper, deadlier sting. No man is so fiercely jealous as he who suspects his best friend.

It was while he was shaving, one morning, shaving quite happily, listening to Pauline's voice gaily trilling in her room, that the thought struck him. Suddenly he put down his razor and watched a small spot of red on his chin grow larger and larger.

No, he had not wounded himself, he knew. That blood was really drawn by Norman Willyer. . . . Merry as a canary, Pauline sang on. . . . Lester cleaned his razor and rubbed an alum stick on his cut; but still it bled and bled. . . . And, like a spiritual wound, his sudden jealousy bled and bled. . . .

Had n't Pauline been a good deal with Willyer of late? And those long sittings in his studio when she had posed for her portrait — what had happened? Little pictures of the two came back to his mind. Was n't she always watching him, studying him? Was n't she always saying how clever he was, and how sensitive? Was n't she, in short, suspecting Willyer of being John Irons?

Probably every man, if he would but confess it, admires some particular type and recognizes it, when it appears, as the sort of person he would secretly like to be. For Lester Hope, Willyer personified that ideal. The best testimony to the strength and elegance of the big blond artist with the pointed beard was that even women's opinion that he was "charming" could n't damn him in the eyes of men; no such praise can hurt a man who is

as good on a hunting trip as in a studio. But what Lester most admired about him was that Willyer, unlike most of the pseudo-celebrities exploited by Mrs. Woodling & Co., knew the difference between conversation and mere talk. He always looked forward to seeing Willyer; they had tastes, and — what was still more satisfactory — distastes in common; they often had very agreeable masculine conversations in mere monosyllables. In short, there was never that infernal sheet of plate glass between them that Lester usually found seeming to shut him off from other men.

Now, in a single moment the thought of Willyer had become sickeningly painful. If Pauline did think Willyer was J. I., there was trouble ahead. But how the devil was Lester to find out?

Uncomfortable, perplexed, he entered her room. Pauline, without turning, smiled at him in her mirror.

"Say, Pauline," he seated himself on her bed. "How many sittings did you have with Willyer — d' you remember?"

As the soft lead pencil administered an extra quarter of an inch to her already perfect

eyebrows, Pauline didn't really recall — half a dozen, perhaps — why?

Oh, it was nothing. Somebody had asked him, that was all. Lester sat watching her, suffering her prettiness — hungry to claim it, enjoy it.

"Ripping studio, Willyer has, isn't it!" (How he loathed that studio now!) "Must be a rich place to talk in." (What had *she* talked in it?) "Magnificent rugs. Like to get him to pick some out for us. Seems to know a lot about such things." (What other things did Willyer know?)

Oh, yes, Mr. Willyer was very clever. She liked Willyer. So clean, and so graceful — expressive gestures, too, hadn't he? And Pauline, rising, turned a frank gaze at her husband.

She had turned, however, just as frank a gaze at him yesterday, he recalled, after she had received such a letter from John Irons as most wives would hesitate to show to their husbands. "If love is a unified trinity of emotions — spiritual, mental, and physical — don't for a minute imagine that I am all Holy

Ghost! I don't believe that any woman wants to think that she *has n't* sexual attraction — well, then, why not say frankly that *you* have? You 're no more an angel than I am a phantom, and if I were blind and deaf and dumb I could have no greater desire to see you and hear you and touch you!"

The sentiment did not in the least seem to offend her. "If I could only hear your voice, it would tell me all I want to know," she wrote. "Would it rend your delightful veil of mystery if you should, say, talk to me on the telephone? — It is surely an instrument of Romance. But yet, you have such a graphic, colorful way of revealing yourself that I scarcely think I should be surprised if I did hear you speak."

Lester smiled cynically. How often had he heard it said that, when a man's wife has an affair with another man, her husband is usually the last one to hear of it. At least they could never say that of *him!* And yet, what *did* he know? Whatever was in Pauline's mind was, after all, as deeply hidden from him as any other guilty wife's secret.

Could her letter mean that his own ardent words went perfectly, in her mind, with Willyer's pleasing personality?

As he watched her with Willyer, next day, she was, for all Lester could detect, not particularly happy or excited with his friend; and Willyer, damn him, appeared perfectly natural, frank, candid, altogether admirable, as usual. Yet the thought that Pauline might be thinking of Willyer as that impassioned J. I., who was bombarding her with provocative missives, kept Lester in a delirium of jealousy. How the devil could any woman, he wondered, resist Norman Willyer — who seemed to care nothing for any of them?

On his way downtown one morning, unconsciously he found himself turning in at his club. Usually there was nobody about at this hour, and so by one of the big windows on the avenue he selected an easy chair and lighted a cigar to think things over.

"Oh, I say, Hope, may I speak to you a moment?"

A black eye-glass ribbon dangled before him, and Lester looked up at a little black, chopped mustache.

Before he could rise, however, a chair was being pulled up with, "Say, I 'd like to apologize to you, Hope — or rather, I 'd like to explain."

Again Lester tried to escape — but he could n't. A horrid curiosity held him. He watched the poet as one watches a barnyard pest, and glared.

"You remember," said Smithers, quite jauntily, playing with his bamboo stick, "that night I took a certain lady to the Woodlings'? Well, really I 'm afraid I must have quite pardonably misinterpreted something she said. That is to say" — he waved an effeminate hand — "she said something, or at least I understood her to say something, about my writing to her, you know. There was something of that sort, anyway. No, just wait a minute, please! I took it, naturally, that she wanted me to write to her — awfully queer and all that, of course, but how the devil could I help it? She was really, you know, if I do say it, well, what you might call encouraging — you know what I mean? Oh, hold on; it was just simply a misunderstanding. I suppose I *was* a little hasty in my presump-

tions, but, Lord, I don't see why she should have taken fire the way she did, much less gone home alone — what 's the matter? "

Lester Hope's tense fingers knew, at that moment, exactly how Smithers's white throat would feel if his own two thumbs should meet on that poet's windpipe. It was hard work controlling himself enough to say, " D' you mind leaving me alone? Or do I have to violate the house rules? "

Smithers did not move.

" Good morning! " Lester repeated, rising. The moment grew dangerous.

" By Jove! " drawled Smithers. He was not looking at Lester, now; he was gazing out the broad front window. He pointed with his little bamboo stick. " I see why you took this seat," he grinned. " Behold the beauteous lady in question! I 've seen her several times lately — like that. Of course you know Willyer's studio is right over — Oh, good morning, Hope; yes, I 'm going! " And with an ironic laugh he was off before Lester could — well, what, in " a gentlemen's club " could he have done?

Pauline's ermines, now, were crossing the

Wasn't she always saying how clever he was, and how sensitive?

street beside a tall gray overcoat. Now they were at the entrance to Willyer's studio building. Now they had disappeared.

Well, thought Lester, why not? It was all right enough, of course. Many people went to Willyer's studio. But somehow his own reason had deserted him, and he was the prey of raging doubts.

"Have you seen Willyer lately?" he asked Pauline, next morning. It was all he could do to voice the question.

Pauline's face brightened. "Oh, Les, I forgot to tell you. Why, yes, I had luncheon with him at his studio, yesterday. Helen Ramsay was there. She 's so silly, lately. She always seems to own that studio."

Did n't she run on a bit hysterically? he thought; was n't there too much of Helen Ramsay, too much explanation of that particular studio party? It sounded suspicious. Lester's mood grew darker.

That evening Willyer dropped in, as he often did, nowadays, for a game of chess. Of course it happened to be one of the few nights that Pauline remained at home. Was it really fortuitous? Lester wondered, as he watched

her. There was no doubt at any rate she was posing for Willyer, at least to the extent of making a charming figure of herself, under the lamp, reading her book.

Ordinarily, Lester played a scientific, impersonal game, that kept him cool and unruffled. But to-night his heart beat passionately in the crises of the game, and he found himself desperately fighting a personal antagonist. Willyer's leisurely, artistic hands over the board maddened him. And any one who has ever been beaten at a game of skill by one who has also beaten him at the game of love will know how Lester Hope felt when his antagonist pronounced "Checkmate!"

Willyer rose, yawned, and stood, tall and graceful, by the mantel. Why the devil does n't he go home, damn him? Lester said to himself, as he saw Pauline's eyes watching him admiringly.

Willyer, however, seemed disinclined to move. For some minutes, his hands in the pockets of his speckled gray homespun suit, he regarded his friend quizzically. Next, he slowly examined his cuff-links with absorbed interest. Then his long fingers pulled

thoughtfully, lazily, at his blond Vandyke beard. Finally he broke the long silence by remarking:

"I say, I've got some news for you people. I do hope you'll like it. The fact is, I'm about to take the fatal plunge."

Lester stared. Pauline stared. Not a word, till Willyer, chuckling at their surprise, added: "That's right. I'm engaged. It's Helen Ramsay. She said I might tell just you two."

Tick — tick — tick — tick went the clock; then, "Well, what's the matter?" The voice of Willyer took on a sharper, harsher tone. "Can't you congratulate me? Lord, I should say you didn't approve!"

Up jumped Lester and clapped him riotously on the shoulder. "Congratulate you! Yes, by Jove, of course I do!" Grabbing Willyer's hand, Lester shook off the suspicions and jealousies of a month of suffering. "Fine! Fine! Fine! Why, I'm delighted!" He shook that hand till Willyer's eyes grew large. "Why, it's the best news I've heard for a year! — isn't it, Pauline?"

Pauline's voice came calmly enough, but her

smile was queer. "Why, yes, of course! I 'm really awfully, awfully pleased, Mr. Willyer! Helen 's such a dear — I 'm *so* fond of her. Indeed, you 're both of you in luck!"

Fairly bubbling over, now, Lester herded him into the dining-room for an immediate drink, Willyer, apparently, a bit puzzled by his tardy enthusiasm. As they left, Pauline was sitting inert. Pauline was gazing up at her portrait with that same queer smile.

Many things he had repressed (things he could n't bring himself to write for fear that Willyer might get the credit for them), now appeared in John Irons's letters.

Was she happy? Lester learned to his surprise that she was not; even her "best of husbands," apparently, could not make her so.

Did she love that superlative husband? She ignored the question.

What did she do with herself? Unsuspected little adventures she never had told her husband came out. It developed, for instance — she made a joke of it — that Peever, dry old

Peever, had tried to make silly love to her — yes, and in Lester Hope's own library!

"I think you were rather rude to Mr. Peever, last night," said Pauline, one day soon after that. What could poor Lester say? As John Irons, he had already said all that was necessary. But Peever never saw Pauline alone again in Lester's house.

Queer, however, that it was old Peever who speeded John Irons up. Lester, seconding John Irons' fighting toward a finish, suddenly found his principal a bit slow. Why, if even Peever could put in a few strokes behind his back, John would have to make himself more forcibly felt.

From that day J. I. became ubiquitous. Messengers boys, as Pauline stepped into her cab in front of the house, handed her notes, or flowers — while Lester gazed gloomily upon the act from behind a bedroom window curtain. That she might not forget John Irons even for a day, he had her followed; taxicabs drew up to the curb when she emerged from teas, or waited for hours at her club, ready to take her orders. How did J. I. know

her habits so well? she asked, as bewildered as she was flattered. J. I. refused to state. But he succeeded in raising his mystery to a second degree. Books came, confectionery came, flowers came. He tried jewelry — but Pauline sent the parcels back.

It was she herself who, perhaps unconsciously, raised the mystery still higher. Women live mainly in the present, men in the future. It is not man's eager desire for the *dénouement* that gives women pleasure in an affair of the heart; it is the playing with possibilities, the exquisite unfolding of romance. And so, never once did Pauline ask to meet John Irons; and Lester had, besides his own personal energy, the accomplice of her creative imagination.

How busy that imagination was, and how dangerous it might be, he found out, soon after Willyer was removed from the field of suspicion.

He had a melancholy streak, one day; it was after Pauline had been dining out for a week, and he had, consequently, not seen her even at breakfast.

"You were not so far wrong," he wrote,

" when you once likened me to a prisoner in a dungeon. For all hopes I have of gaining you, I am immured in a cell of loneliness. What would I do without your letter every day? By that one window through which you shine I get all I know of happiness. For your ray of light I watch daily, and for that one hour I am joyful. When that gracile vision fades, you will never know my recidivation into the gloom of — waiting!"

Reading it over, he smiled. "Recidivation" and "gracile" were hardly in his normal vocabulary, and it occurred to him that he had done an amusing bit of unconscious cerebration with those words. Where had he heard them lately? Oh, yes. In Spenser Thasp's weekly theatrical article.

Queer, too, because Thasp was Lester's *bête noir,* or, more strictly, his *bête rouge.* It was n't however so much Thasp's brisk red hair and orange mustache that Lester abhorred; it was the fact that Thasp was perhaps the most saturating talker ever tolerated in an intellectual drawing-room; and, like most of his species, talked mainly about himself and his own work.

As luck ordained, Thasp appeared next day, at one of the few dinners of Pauline's which Lester — desperate to see her, watch her, adore her — had decided to grace as host. Thasp, he suspected, was tolerated mainly on account of his influence with the newspapers. Pauline never lost a chance — though always a delicate, unobvious, ladylike chance — to advertise herself. Thasp, therefore, was allowed to perform, and assiduously he did perform, upon his one-stringed harp. Peever yawned, Helen and Willyer held communion with their eyes; Mrs. Woodling listened, believing, apparently, everything he said. Pauline's attention was a fine bit of acting until — he had talked from soup to ice, laughing heartily at his own wit, as such bores ever do —

"In point of fact, the American stage is in a lamentable state of recidivation. Where are there such gracile stars as Modjeska, as Mary Anderson and Lotta —" and so on, and on, and on interminably.

"What the devil is 'recidivation'?" muttered Willyer in Lester's ear.

His question was unanswered. Lester, watching Pauline, had seen her stop, spoon in

air, staring at Thasp. There was an expression on her face, part incredulity, part horror. It was controlled in a moment, but until the ladies left the room, she cast keen glances from time to time at the critic. Apparently she was fascinated by him.

Lester looked on, helpless. She had, of course, been struck by those two words, both rather unusual, and had recalled their occurrence in the last letter from John Irons. Thasp, scourge though he was, was indubitably clever, not at all one to be disregarded offhand as a possible John Irons. All that sustained Lester, in the *contretemps* — his own fault — was that expression of dislike on Pauline's face. No wonder she shuddered if she were thinking of what she herself had written — possibly to Spenser Thasp!

It was not Lester himself, this time, who had to be saved; it was Pauline. The proof of it was that, for a week, she did not answer John Irons's letters. Undoubtedly she was afraid of committing herself with the critic and was waiting for further evidence. What, then, could be done to destroy him?

A night of deliberation brought Lester, one

morning, to Pauline's room with the information that he was called to Washington on business. With this alibi established, that evening he kissed her good-by. He could hardly have gone to Washington, however, for, two days later, Pauline received a letter from John Irons stating that, for a week, his address would be "General Delivery, Boston."

It was a merry answer John Irons received in Boston: "I met Spenser Thasp at dinner at the Woodlings' to-night," she wrote, "and if you will promise to forgive me, I will confess a shameful thing. For three days I almost believed that you were Thasp. Don't be insulted; really, the evidence was damning. I was so relieved when I got your letter. It was *such* a satisfaction to know that 'not being a bird,' you could not be in two places at once."

Exultant at this success, Lester returned home to find that he had not only settled Thasp, but, by his little trip, had settled almost any possible suspect, as well. Pauline now had her touchstone for them.

"Have you been in Boston recently?" he heard her ask, one afternoon, at tea time, a

rather too-dashing young architect, who had worshiped at her shrine for some weeks past.

No; he had not, it appeared, eaten brown bread and baked beans for years. Lester noted, with considerable glee, that afterwards, when that suitor called, Pauline spent far less time on the lamentable lack of prestige given to architects as compared with all other artists. Whether they "signed" their buildings or not, she no longer seemed to care.

So Pauline applied her test, and was able to discover, if not who John Irons was, at least who he was not. More than once Lester was to catch that magic word "Boston" and see her countenance clear at the puzzled answer: "Why, no! What made you think I 'd been there?" Another candidate eliminated.

And, each time he noted her suspicions, John Irons quickened his game. Even if it were but a line or two, he managed to have her receive a letter by almost every delivery. Six hours did not pass without her being reminded of him in some exciting way. Finally, when every expedient he could think of had been tried, one day Lester found his hand reaching for the telephone.

He called her number; he heard her say, "Hello!"

He tried his best to think of himself as some short, stout person with yellow whiskers; hoping in that way to disguise his voice. He succeeded somehow in enunciating in a very fat tone, the name "John Irons."

He heard her gasp. There was a long silence. Then, "Is it really you?" she asked. No answer. *"Really?"*

"Yes."

Another pause. "Well, why don't you say something?" No answer. "Can't you?"

"No."

"Oh, why not?" A long wait. "Don't you dare?"

"No."

"Oh, I see. Then, I suppose, I shall have to do the talking."

"Yes."

"Like a game of Forty Questions?"

"Yes."

She laughed. "Well, am I ever to know who you are?"

How curiously his heart was beating! He was talking to his own wife, or, rather, he was

listening to her, as he had listened every day for years. Why should he tremble?

"Have you seen me lately?"

"Yes."

"Where? Oh, I forgot; you can't answer. Well, you know this is hardly fair, making me do all the work talking. You know I'm dying to hear your voice. Can't you say anything besides 'yes' and 'no'?"

"No."

"Are you still in love with me?"

"Yes." But he could hardly get it out.

And then, impulsively, he snapped the receiver back on the hook. For some reason he could n't quite bear to go on.

V

IN Lester Hope's private office there was a well-worn track in the green carpet from the door to the window. Traveling that road, to and fro, working out difficult legal cases, he had walked many a mile. So now he walked, but not as a lawyer; this case was not one for the intellect, it was for the heart.

Well, what, after six months' perfervid correspondence with Pauline, had he accomplished? Had his passionate attempt served only to amuse her? Was it merely a flirtation by post? He could n't quite believe it. At any rate, the affair should now be at the boiling point; if he had n't yet won her, he never would. Wherefore, at whatever the risk, the time had come, he decided, to put his courtship to the test and find out definitely whether he were still only Mrs. Hope's Husband or had indeed become Mrs. Hope's Lover.

He was sick of the suspense, sick of the

artificiality, sick of the deception. To reveal himself, to confess the whole thing to her, laugh over it — and then to be together again where they were before they had gone astray — how he longed for it! If Lester Hope, thrown overboard, had really drowned, his ghost now haunted John Irons. The impossible, romantic situation had tired him; he wanted reality — he wanted his own wife back. But, to get her he must win this last move! So, many a time, up and down he paced; many a letter he wrote before he wrote the one that, at last, he sent her. It was short:

"*My dear:*

"Don't be afraid that I have lost my sense of humor; but to-day I must be serious. At any rate, the question I want to ask is quite in earnest. My dear, not knowing me in the flesh perhaps you may have really got to thinking of me as a kind of disembodied spirit. But I assure you I am not. I am a live man. My love for you is real and human. It is so great that any attempt to try to express it would be futile. I can only trust that my sincerity has convinced you, that you have felt the

truth, and that you care, as I care. So far, I have been able to wait and hope; but I can't, any more. My dear, I *must* know now whether you can love me, do love me in the way I love you. We must meet; but, before you ever see me you must answer me. Will you answer me?"

Next morning, Lester went downstairs early. Pauline rose, and Pauline dressed. Down the curly staircase, clad all in white, she came a-singing. Thus, capriciously, once or twice a month, this lady chose to grace her husband's breakfast.

But to-day, when she appeared in the dining-room, her whimsical mood perturbed him. He found himself watching her as one watches a child with firearms. Why did she take this particular morning to honor him, he wondered. Why, as she airily sat down opposite him, had she to be so gay, to rally him on his own taciturnity? For, try as he might to respond in the same vein, that letter of his, awaiting her, hidden in the pile beside her plate, obsessed him; it fascinated him like a lighted bomb.

Laughing and chattering, she picked up her mail and looked it over.

"Oh, dear, three more wedding presents to be bought this month!" she remarked, sighing; "really it would n't be a bad idea, for Helen Ramsay's, to give her one of my old manuscripts. She has n't sold a story for ages, poor thing! After inviting every editor in New York to her literary dinners, too!" And then, while jocosely wondering what letters *he* was receiving at his office, meanwhile, and how did she know he was n't perhaps corresponding with some dangerous blonde — her persiflage suddenly stopped.

In her hand was a yellow envelope. She gave him a look. For a moment she seemed uncertain whether or not to open it; but, as his oatmeal seemed to interest him extraordinarily just then, she nonchalantly drew out the letter.

Lester, reaching for the cream, saw her face change quickly while she read. Then, as she laid the sheet aside, he admired her control; it was far better than his own. She had assumed woman's favorite disguise, a smile.

The rest of the meal was eaten in silence;

quite the lady of the portrait was Pauline Hope.

"Good-by, Pauline!"

"Good-by, Lester!"

As he left, he felt as he had often felt when, after doing all he could, he had seen a jury file out to consider the verdict. He closed the door. It was Pauline's turn again.

Corporations and corporation counsel, receiverships, appeals, exceptions, demurrers, rebuttals, and writs of error confused him next day. His work was far behind; that day it fell behind still more. Lester Hope, attorney-at-law, sitting at a desk covered with papers, papers, papers — and a pale blue letter — harassed by questions and telephone calls and callers, read and reread legal documents endlessly without comprehension. To wit:

"It is understood and agreed between the two parties to this contract that *I cannot do what you wish — I cannot!*" What did *that* mean? "And it is furthermore agreed that if at any time *you have no right to ask me; I know too little of you!*" Ah, little enough did he know, too! With a great effort he

would try to separate the two documents, law from love, and keep "their heirs, assigns, and administrators" from *"I cannot answer. You must not write to me again,"*— but such strange terms as "hereunto set our hands and seals" would persist in getting mixed up with still stranger sentences: *"If you do persist in writing, I shall be forced to place your letters in the hands of my husband!"*

All he could get through his head was that, dreadfully, it was all over, his romance; and he had failed. The case of "Irons *vs.* Hope" had been decided against him. He had lost Pauline a second time!

That night he had his dinner sent into the office and he worked long after the others had gone. How often, of late, he had stayed there all alone with the one light at his desk — and Pauline! But now it all seemed changed — cold, empty, desolate. It was only an office, now; something had gone that had once made it almost a home.

"You must not write to me again!" The secret, charming creature that in this dull room he had conjured up out of the failure of his

married life had vanished like a fairy back again into the Unreal.

. . . . . .

Where were those roses — that bunch of red roses? In the library, in the dining-room, her chamber, no sign of them he saw; and Pauline said nothing. Yet the florist had sworn he had sent them, that they had been received, and with them, yes, he was sure, the card with the inscription, "*Finis. J. I.*" Could Pauline possibly have thrown them away?

Weeks passed. . . . In spite of himself, in spite of her renewed attempts at comradeship, Lester became with his wife more — what was it — distant? Self-conscious? Formal? Without the stimulus of her letters he found himself steadily more nervous and distraught. His experiment had failed; things between them were worse, rather than better.

That Pauline thought so, too, was evidenced when, one day, she announced that she was going to visit her mother for a month or so. She wanted to finish her new novel in peace, that was her excuse; but might n't she perhaps wish peace also for her conscience — or her heart? So Lester wondered, left alone.

In the unusual quiet of the house — for nobody more famous than grocers and bill-collectors disturbed Mrs. Hope's Husband when Mrs. Hope was away — he spent many a dreary evening in thought. And that evening was dreariest when — with what a pang he recognized that familiar pale blue envelope! — he received his first duty-letter from his wife.

It told of the weather, it told of the theaters, it told of the state of her health. The tears came to his eyes, to read her perfunctory commonplaces dashed off in the same bold, rapid handwriting that had indited such spirited and gallant messages. Ah, both were drowned, now — John Irons as well as Lester Hope!

Must he give her up? As time went on, stronger and stronger became his impulse, despite her command, to write to her just once more. Would she really show the letters, confess everything, to her husband? And what, in the name of nonsense, if she did? A tragic little farce, that, for an evening by the fireside — he and Pauline pouring quicklime on the corpse of poor John Irons!

And then, another dismal afternoon when, unable to work, he stood at his office window,

moodily watching the smoke of a chimney opposite, blown about quite as fantastically as was he himself, the idea came to him — why not, instead of forcing *her* to confess, confess himself? Why not make an end of the mystery — tell the whole wretched story of his negation, his wounded pride, his suffering, and let come of it what would? He had lost. The situation, at any rate could n't be worse. More and more he grew inclined to try it. He longed for the relief of confession. It did n't seem possible any longer to keep his misery to himself.

And so it was that one evening he sat wearily down to his desk in the office, and, frowning, inserted a sheet of paper into his typewriter. . . . A half hour passed, . . . and then, almost automatically, he began to write. . . .

It is only weak souls that are crushed by suffering; those of firmer fiber resist to the end, and that very resistance it is that finally forces the revelation of oneself in bursts of power. So, in Lester Hope's mind the tension of months suddenly broke, and everything that he had endured poured forth with the unconscious energy of pure feeling.

"I have searched my soul for phrases"— so Pauline with her facile grace had written; but Lester Hope toyed with no such pretty fallacy. His soul was ransacked by savage emotions that snatched mutinously at what terms they could find at hand and set them furiously at work to effect their revolt. Not like her filigree sentences did his flash and sparkle, like jewels artfully arranged. He took no thought of words — no adjectives he chose for mere literary beauty. The passionate, strong suffering Idea led him fiercely, unerringly, along the old, simple, forthright Anglo-Saxon ways. Unction is in all elemental impulse. True emotion has instinctive modes; it is as crisp as childhood, as dramatic as a tempest.

This night, Lester Hope was freeing his mind simply and without shame. Like a prisoner who for months has been starved and tortured, now, bursting the bonds of discretion, bold Truth sprang out of him . . . glowing with his new liberty, rejoicing in self-expression, he wrote on and on. . . .

It was long after midnight when he awakened from his absorption. Where was he?

. . . He looked curiously about — saw that he was in a room — an office — there was a filing cabinet — oh, yes, *his* office, of course! He seemed to have come back from somewhere.

The floor was strewn with papers. How many papers there were! He picked them up, and arranged the sheets, wondering why he had such a queer sensation — such a relief. It was as if a high wind that had long been blowing in his mind had abated — and he was at peace.

It was the calmest moment he had known for many months when, lighting a cigar and tilting comfortably back in his chair, he began to read what he had written. When he had finished he was almost afraid of it. No, it was still hot from his brain's mint; he would put it away till he could get a cooler, better judgment of it to-morrow. In a reverie he finished his cigar. Then folding the sheets into his pocket, he went home.

On the morrow, however, after re-reading it calmly in his library, he saw that it would never do to send it to Pauline. Not, at least, in that form. His pride forbade it. He had begun to tear up the pages, regretfully one by one,

when he stopped, his eye fixed on the Wingèd Victory — and then —

On the shoulders of his first idea, another had suddenly vaulted, higher, more ambitious, more bold, and waved him on. Now he saw clearly what to do. That moment was climactic; for an instant he was more than happy; he was exultant, thrilled. Emancipation!

Insistent, that idea drew him every night after dinner back into that creative trance to write and rewrite, forge and file, hammer and polish, over and over and over. The vivid moment passed; and from now on his work was like a hard, slow, laborious fight, night after night of fatiguing effort, concentrated exertion, pressure. Only the artist knows that exquisite, that almost intolerable mixture of pleasure and pain. Only the artist and the mother suffer that delicious agony of creation.

Lester Hope wrote on and on. Even after Pauline had returned, he spent every evening writing at the office.

And lo, as he wrote, the haunting ghost of his stultified self grew dim and dimmer. . . . Mrs. Hope's Husband was vanishing! . . . on and on he wrote . . . on and on and on. . . .

VI

THERE was a way Pauline had, whether she had been away a minute, an hour, or a day, of beginning to speak to him before entering the room, as if continuing a conversation she had only just left. One night toward one o'clock, Lester, looking over her letters in the library, had scarcely time to throw them into a lower drawer of his desk and kick it shut before he heard her voice in the hall. Snatching a copy of "Tom Jones," he began to pretend to read it, upside-down.

"Oh, you really ought to have been there to-night, Lester; it was *so* interesting!" and, appearing in the opening of the portières, Pauline continued, yawning prettily, "I 'm afraid you 'll get awfully stodgy staying by yourself all the time."

Upon his forehead she pressed a dutiful kiss; listless, she dropped upon the couch and began abstractedly to draw off her long suède

gloves. Usually, Pauline came home in high spirits with a lively budget of gossip, and would listen to nothing till she had told it all. But this evening to Lester's questions she gave only an absentminded, "Oh, yes, perhaps," twirling her rings dreamily, or a remote, "No, not exactly"; and gradually the scene dropped.

After a while, she arose restlessly and walked to the fireplace. She stood for some time as if she had forgotten what she was going to do. Finally she roused; and when she turned, he noticed that she had more color than usual.

"Some feminine tiff," thought Lester, regarding her with a husband's eye, "or else it 's that infernal lobster Newburgh they have at the Woodlings'." But his diagnosis, like most husbands', was incorrect.

"Oh, Lester, I had a talk with Peever tonight. Remember how afraid I used to be of him?" A little nervous laugh — (what did *that* mean?) "Well, he 's afraid of *me,* now. About a new author he 's discovered — or rather he *has n't* discovered at all; it seems he 's quite a mystery. Anyway, Peever 's perfectly mad over this man's work, whoever he is.

It 's a short novel. A sort of confession, in a way, I believe — an imaginary biography, or something like that."

She was back on the couch again, speaking a bit excitedly, watching the paper cutter in Lester's hand waving slowly back and forth.

" Why, Peever said he sat up last night and simply bawled over it. Can you imagine Peever's ever bawling over anything, Les? And he 's going to let me read the proofs. I 'm awfully — why, what 's the matter? What a peculiar expression! Oh, well, you need n't smile, Lester; evidently the book *is* unusually strong and original. Why, Peever says it actually bleeds! "

She took a new, quick look at him, saw the paper cutter now calmly slicing an imaginary cake on the table, and added: " John Irons, the man's name is."

No response: but the paper cutter had stopped. " Remember him, Les? " As she watched him, the paper cutter tapped the table slowly, very slowly; then it was laid gently down.

She advanced with caution: " Why, he 's

the man who wrote me about reading my character from my vocabulary. You thought it was so clever."

"Clever!" Lester smiled enigmatically, and carefully inspected the end of his cigar. "*I* thought he was an ass!"

A quick frown marked Pauline's displeasure. There was a pregnant silence; then, shrugging, she rose languidly and drawing the flowers from her corsage, she arranged them in a vase — thoughtfully. Turning at last, sweetly she smiled at him; then, "Well, what have *you* been doing all the evening, Lester?" Her tone had the far-away indifference of one who says: "Remember me to your mother," or, "If there is anything I can do, let me know."

That night he lay awake for long. The letter he had started to Pauline, the letter that, running away with him, had developed in such unexpected fashion, she would read, now — in type! — and all the world, too, might read it. His novel had been accepted!

But, after all, what did *that* matter, now? The writing of it had been not a quest for fame, but a spiritual experience, a passion — a

cri du cœur. He smiled, recalling how often he had heard Pauline say, "Oh, I just *love* to write!"

So he, too, had hoped some day to sit quietly down with paper, fountain pen, and a box of cigars, and satisfy the secret desire which, ever since he had first loved Pauline, he had sacrificed to make her ambitions paramount.

How strange, now, seemed that pleasant, romantic view of literary composition! He thought of those nights at the office as having been crammed with infinitely harder, more exhausting work than ever he had put on Blackstone, Torts, or Contracts. And so, now, the fact that Peever approved his book interested him no whit; what did interest him and kept him so long awake was: how would it affect Pauline?

"Your little novel may have a fair success," Peever wrote to John Irons, "and we shall be glad to put it into type as soon as you can call in and sign the contract." Peever said nothing whatever about "bawling" over the book, but he did rather suspect (from the address), that "John Irons" was a pseudonym.

There was a small oblong hole in the paper, through which, quite unsuspected, he could watch his wife

John Irons refusing to call, however, Peever got no nearer the mystery of its authorship. Following the agreement he reluctantly mailed (wherein John Irons became a "Party of the Second Part") came, a week or so later, the proofs, a jolly fat roll filling Box 1711; and then, behold, one evening in the library, appeared a similar fat roll — in the hands of Pauline!

Luxuriously reclining, propped with cushions on the big leather couch, she began to read the sheets. Settled back in his Morris chair, comfortably, Lester Hope began to read the evening paper. After a while, she was sitting up straighter. After a while, *he* was sitting up straighter. After a while she moved to an easy chair nearer the lamp.

Now in Lester's newspaper, that evening, he had just noticed a short legal item; and, as Pauline read on, he reached for the scissors and snipped it neatly out. Queerly enough, after he had removed the clipping there was a small oblong hole in the paper, through which, as through a little window, he could, and he did, quite unsuspectedly, watch his wife.

The amused smile — a bit patronizing, even,

at first — had already given way to a look of intense interest — absorption. At times laying down the sheets she would sit gazing off, lost; while Lester ostentatiously rustled his paper or lit cigars, as one engrossed in the Law, to whom mere Literature was a silly pastime.

But she had not read long before he found the look in her face growing still more fascinating. Her lips moved, her brows drew down. And finally, through his little Judas-hole, Lester saw in his wife's eyes something that gave him a grim pleasure — tears!

He saw her dash them off. She rose, proofs in hand. "I 'm getting rather sleepy, Les," she said, "I think I 'll go up to bed."

After those dull blue portières had closed upon her abrupt "Good night," Lester Hope smoked, smoked, cigar after cigar. . . . At one o'clock, when he went upstairs, he noticed that there was a light in her room. Pausing a moment by her door, he listened; — why, was that Pauline sobbing?

Tears, yes; one sometimes sheds tears; but one does n't sob aloud over mere fiction.

What did that sobbing mean? Should he knock at the door? No. No — he would go on.

Next morning, however, it was the aristocratic lady of the portrait who came down to him; her eyes were hard and bright. A fortnight passed. One evening he patronizingly picked up a copy of a new book, "The Book of Pride," which had appeared mysteriously on the library table, and idly turned the pages. Far from idly had he turned those pages when he first received from the publisher that very book!

Pauline remarked casually that the novel seemed to have caught the public. The reviews were better than enthusiastic; they were causing discussion; everybody was reading "The Book of Pride," and wondering who John Irons really was. Peever had told her, in fact, that the first edition was already sold out.

All this neither interested nor surprised him. What did surprise him, however, was a remark she made, later, after he had acknowledged having read the book.

"I like the heroine, rather," said Lester.

"That 's just the one I dislike," Pauline replied. "She 's a perfect minx."

Lester smiled. "I 'm afraid you don't quite understand her." And then he added, reflectively, "I think the author did, though."

"John Irons?" Pauline took up the novel and began thoughtfully to turn the pages. "Of course any one like that is fascinating to read about, but I mean — well, actually to live with, you know, I 'm afraid she 'd be trying, at least."

He had another surprise when, one morning, he caught a first sight of the extraordinary appearance of Post Office Box No. 1711.

Receiving now no letters from Pauline, it had been over a week since he had looked into that box. But this morning it was so full of letters that, when he opened the door, they poured out, tumbling upon the tiled floor.

Amazed, he tore one open. Why, it was as if he were back at that happy, suburban breakfast table again with Pauline listening to the first flattering tributes to her stories! But no; as he walked along, dipping into another and another, these "charmed-with-its" and "in-

dignants," these young lady letters of praise and spinsters' disapproval were now the ridiculous gratuities of his own literary success! No, he was not running for the 7.55, proud of Pauline's prestige, he was proceeding sedately to his office quite unmoved by the thirty-two letters from strangers testifying to the popularity of John Irons.

That superior, unmoved serenity, however, received a shock when, skimming the pile of letters at his desk, from "so human and so convincing" to "no man who really loved would *ever* act like that," he came unexpectedly upon one from Pauline! Crowded in and lost amongst all the others, she seemed pathetic.

"*My dear John Irons:*

"I have read it! *What* an alluring plot! You won't find many women, I 'm afraid, who will openly approve a hero who refuses to marry his sweetheart just because she had suddenly become famous; but all the same you 're right, and every woman will secretly sympathize with him, as I certainly do, J. I. Whatever the feminists say, there is n't a woman worth having, no, for that matter, not the

stoutest, mannishest, most militant standard-bearer in the Suffrage Parade who does n't, at heart, wish her lover to dominate. That 's what ' lover ' means, in woman-talk. Strength of mind and strength of body — that 's what women want; they still love to be mastered - - at least *I* do, anyway. That 's the surest way to be happy. I know that well. Women love villains (the right kind of villains), and brutes — attractive brutes, at least. Surely an artist, a creator like you, will know what I mean.

" Don't try to deny that the novel is the story of your own life; I feel it, I know it. No doubt you have paraphrased the actual facts beyond all recognition to protect that girl, but, oh, you must have lived those emotions, or never, never could you have made the story so bitey and so bitter. At first I hated your heroine. Then I pitied her. How you succeed in making one love that woman, I don't see. No doubt because *you* have loved her — vain and spoiled though she was.

" And talk about telling *my* character from my vocabulary, what about ' wounded pride ' and ' shame ' and ' lost self-respect ' and ' humiliation '? Why, I could make columns and

columns of your pet words that show how you must have suffered, even if the whole book itself were n't full of pin-pricks! Why, J. I., I actually cried to think I had written that cruel letter to you. Who *are* you? *What* are you? *Where* are you? 'Secrecy'—'hidden'—'reserve'—'masque'—'concealed'—you must be as subtle and as proud as Satan!

"Altogether the book had so strange an effect upon me that I found myself reading it as if it were a letter to just Me. Was n't that what your daring and flattering mysterious dedication meant? It brought you nearer to me than all your letters. Who *are* you? I feel as if you were right in the next room and I could n't open the door! I get such mysterious glimpses through the keyhole, though; and I can *almost* recognize your voice! But, whoever you are, I am sure you 're a genius. Oh, I 'm afraid of you, now, J. I. What could you ever have seen in me? But in all humility I say, now — if you wish it — I hope you do! — I shall be *so* glad to see you —"

So far, he had read with a pleasant excitement; but "I shall be so glad to see you"

brought a frown. See him! That would never do. She had had her chance; it was too late, now. The next line deepened the furrow between his eyes. "— that is, if you are n't now too famous for me."

"Famous!"— the frown changed to a sneer. Was n't it just because he *was* "famous," as she called it, or whatever it was that all these letters and the literary gossip proved, that Pauline had suddenly affected this new interest in John Irons? With her whole little hero-worshiping world gabbling about the "Book of Pride," of course she could n't afford to let the mysterious author go!

No, he 'd be damned if he 'd answer the letter. If she wanted him, now, only because he was famous — but there he stopped; he smiled.

Of all insidious drinks, perhaps none turn the head so effectively as those that are smooth and sweet. Fame, too, is dangerously sweet. For three weeks Lester Hope had been tasting praise and publicity in daily doses. Careless as he had been at first of any recognition, he could n't forever ignore the amusing worldly rewards of his literary effort. Now, for the first time, he realized that no longer was he

"Mrs. Hope's Husband." He was "the Author of," he had a "tag"; he was the "famous" John Irons. In short he had "done something!"

"Where are you going to-night, Pauline?" he asked, one evening, wandering debonairly into his wife's room to find her dressing.

"Oh, just the Woodlings'. Hand me that brooch, will you, Les?"

He handed it to her with a playful gesture; she did not notice it. Then, hands in pockets, he regarded her admiringly. She was putting an ornament in her hair.

Said Lester, "I believe I 'll go along with you."

She stopped, hands upraised, and stared at him. Then: "Oh, I 'm awfully *glad!*"

He noticed her equivocal accent, and smiled. Nevertheless, to the Woodlings' he went that night, and, moreover, he thoroughly enjoyed mingling again with those who had "done something." Self-consciousness was gone from Lester Hope. He cared no longer how he appeared nor what people thought of him. He neither posed nor felt ashamed. His se-

cret so sustained him that the very way he entered a room was different.

Not even when he was introduced as "Mrs. Hope's Husband" did he lose his equanimity. The bony dowager of the emeralds he found himself actually enjoying this evening as an excellent comedy character part. He enjoyed "my daughter Pearl." Why, in this mood, he could have enjoyed even talker Thasp, the Bore Royal.

But, after all, was n't it really himself that he was most enjoying? Haroun Al-Raschid, no doubt, never felt himself quite so much a sultan as when *incognito* on the streets of Bagdad, he was clapped familiarly on the shoulder by a porter, or asked to help a blind beggar. So, hearing John Irons's name, and the "Book of Pride" continually buzzing about him, Leser Hope (as one who fumbles a diamond in his pocket) diverted himself with his paradox, marveling what would happen should he murmur into the jeweled ear that never yet had listened to his words: "Florrie Woodling, behold me, your latest lion!"

Not that he had the slightest desire to do so. What overt praise could equal the piquant

flattery of overhearing himself and his work discussed? Indeed, so delightfully superior did he feel in his modest disguise that few farces had ever pleased him as did a little dialogue he listened to while loitering alone by the palms. A peep through the leaves showed him that others, also, might assume that modest disguise!

Behind his beribboned goggles, Smithers was looking more than usually important, to-night. He was evidently enjoying himself.

"I believe you *are* he!" said Helen Ramsay, shaking a coy finger at him. "Now, are n't you?"

Smithers, besides looking important, looked wise.

"You don't dare say you 're *not,* at any rate!" she insisted.

Smithers, besides looking important and wise, looked mysterious.

"My dear Miss Ramsay," he drawled, "what in the world is the use of my saying anything at all about it? Suppose I do deny it — what would that prove? If I really *were* John Irons, would n't I deny it, also? I 'd have to, to defend my secret, would n't I?"

And with a bland smile Smithers tactily assumed the laurels.

And with a smile equally bland Lester Hope, almost as invisible to Mrs. Woodling's clever guests as was John Irons himself, wandered and wondered like a pleased ghost through the evening's entertainment, not noticing this time the adulation paid to his wife, but pausing often idly to twist his mustache and that little tuft below his lip, while maidens exclaimed, "Oh, it *must* be Spenser Thasp, I 'm sure!" or smiling cynically at, "Why not old Peever, sly old dog, himself?"

No one asked Lester Hope's opinion of the popular mystery; no one accused him of being other than a rather poetic looking tall lawyer.

Helen Ramsay Willyer, coming upon him thus alone with his diverting thoughts, smirked coquettishly. "Lester, you 're looking *much* better, lately, d' you know it?" she said. "Somehow you 're more — well, as you used to be; you have more animation. Why, positively, I think you 're growing handsome! What *have* you done to yourself? Lester Hope, are you in love?" He admitted it frankly.

Willyer, tall and blond, looking on with a smile, inspected Lester critically. "Helen's right, Hope," said he. "I've noticed it for some time. I've made a study of your face, you know; I've always wanted to paint your portrait, but there has always been something that baffled me — something I could n't quite decide upon in it. I've got it, now, though, and I believe I could get you onto canvas."

Said Pauline, after their return home, quite in her old mood of gossip, "Oh, Lester, you should have heard that near-sighted old Mrs. Poppity gushing over me to-night. She was *so* lackadaisical and *so* far away! She said, "Oh, Mrs. Hope, when did you first find you had this power?"

"And d' you know what I said to her, Lester? I just took out my powder puff, and I powdered my nose, and I said in just *exactly* as soulful a tone as hers, 'Always Mrs. Poppity; I have *always* known it!' But wait a moment. Listen! The joke of it was, my acting was quite lost on her. She had already begun on Peever. She was asking him who that splendid distinguished looking man was, over there. He looked *so* like a genius!"

Pauline rose, gaily smiling, and touched him mischievously on the shoulder. "And who d' you think it was, Lester?" Pauline broke into laughter. "It was *you!*"

It was his turn to laugh when alone in the library after she had gone upstairs, he recollected his pique at not having been recognized long ago as a potential celebrity. Now, although unconscious of betraying any visible trace of having won a personal victory, that mystic difference between ability in the bud and the full flower of achievement, the pungent, psychic perfume of expression, of success, was beginning to affect those about him, despite all his attempts at concealment. Already Helen had noticed it in his face, and so had Willyer — even near-sighted old Mrs. Poppity! Why, then, had n't Pauline?

That it was only because she was so near to him and so familiar, that it was because she was obsessed with John Irons, he decided, when next day he read:

"*My dear J. I.:*

"Why *don't* you answer? Are you always going to be merely a romantic ghost? I can't

stand it any longer. I have always been afraid of ghosts, J. I., and you haunt me day and night, as if I had murdered you. Well, perhaps I did when I wrote you that cruel letter, so long ago. But if I could only see you — *do* let me see you! — I could tell you, perhaps, just why I refused to let you write to me, and then you would forgive me. Do say you will!"

Oh, yes, he thought, bitterly, tantalizing enough it must be for poor Pauline to know that, when John Irons was a nobody, she had cast him aside. Well, she would have to take the consequences. He was by no means cajoled by her flattery.

No, indeed. That flattery, now, was becoming so frequent that it had begun to lose its spice. He got it not only in letters, from the newspapers and reviews, but it was served, hot and crisp, in his own dining-room. It was more usual nowadays at those little literary dinners that were making Pauline as a hostess in her way quite as noted as Mrs. Woodling in hers, to see the foot of the table occupied by Mrs. Hope's Husband. Suave, smiling, hospitable, he was the most charmingly harmless host ever intellectually ignored. And the most

hospitable: "A little more champagne, Mrs. Woodling?" "Another cognac, Peever?" Unnoticed was the new twinkle in Lester Hope's eye. He felt as if John Irons were surreptitiously kicking him, under the table.

"A very nice chap, that husband of Mrs. Hope's, is n't he?" So people obviously thought, as they talked to Pauline and her assorted authors. "Such large boxes of such large cigars! — Yes, and so soon after the dessert, too; not a second of suspense! Such pleasant compliments, and such affable ways! Say, we *must* have him to dinner next week. He 'll be so attentive to Cousin Dorothy of Toronto — he 'll take her right off our hands, poor thing. She hates literary talk, and they 'll hit it off beautifully!"

And meanwhile, "Have you read 'The Book of Pride'?" But the pretty, privately printed poetess beside him had turned away even before he answered, and was already learning of Peever, Peever purring over his port, that "Why, d' you know, this man Irons has n't even yet cashed the cheque I sent him for an advance on royalties. Eccentric chap, evidently." Lester poured more port and encouraged him.

"One of these temperamental artistic creatures — apparently no idea of money."

Lester's sudden grin caught Peever's eye, and Peever grinned also. "I suppose, Hope, as a business man, you can hardly understand that, eh? Yes, just a very little — this port is excellent! Well, there 's one thing you *do* understand, anyway, Hope, you know good port — ha, ha, ha!"

Laughter; and a sweet smile from Helen Willyer to little Lester.

"That heroine of Irons's is a fascinating character," Peever continued to his port, "exasperating, though, as the modern literary woman is bound to be — present company,"— he waved his glass to Pauline —"of course excepted! Wilful, vain, spoiled."

"Oh, no, not exactly spoiled, surely," said Lester hotly. "Why don't you see, she only —"

But nobody was listening to Mrs. Hope's Husband. Amidst the crackling crunch of celery stalks, the incoming of glasses of pink punch, and the silent offerings of two impassive, unfathomable maids, the guests were agreeing that John Irons's heroine was an ad-

mirable portrait of a familiar type of over-estimated celebrity.

"For my part, I don't see how her lover ever stood her," said Pauline. "He ought to have boxed her ears! Now, if *I* were ever like that —"

"Oh, you'd be fascinating, too, in John Irons's eyes," said Helen; "it's quite obvious that *he* thought her charming, at least."

"Didn't he prove that she was charming?" Lester again ventured, "Isn't it his success just that he did vindicate her apparent vanity?"

Several impatient looks at him indicated plainly that he had said quite enough, as an amateur, amongst technical experts far more competent to criticize. Mrs. Woodling, however, as a professional hostess, was permitted an *ex-officio* word.

Thrilled, yes, almost agonized had Mrs. Woodling been by the "Book of Pride." And, "Ah," she moaned, "if I could *only* get hold of Mr. Irons, I'd give him a reception such as —" up rolled her eyes as if only the heavenly hosts could compete with hers, in splendor. "Ah, such a brilliant light to be hid under so

mysterious a bushel. It 's *so* quaint to be shy, nowadays, is n't it, Mr. Hope?"

Pauline did n't think John Irons was necessarily shy. Nor apparently did Helen Willyer, who looked suddenly very knowing and whose freckled cheeks blushed through her powder. She started to speak. "D' you know —" but the talk had already become general and unctuous with adjectives of praise. Eagerly Helen watched her chance, as they wondered if John Irons *could* be a woman — horrid thought — if the book was n't perhaps too true to be acknowledged, and if it would sell a hundred thousand, and if it would be dramatized.

"D' you know, I wrote —" Helen began again, when again she was submerged in the conversational flood. Still she hung on till a pause gave her, at last, her chance.

"D' you know, I wrote to John Irons a while ago, and —"

"*You* wrote to him?" Pauline faced her like a tigress.

The company sat, spellbound. Helen was now easily the heroine of the party. "Yes, and he answered me!"

"*What* did he say?" Everybody leaned forward. Lester leaned forward.

Helen took her time, gave a proud glance at Willyer, and smiled. "Well, he was most kind and most interesting. Of course, he did n't exactly tell who he was, but — well, I don't think, really, I ought to repeat just what he said. It was confidential."

Lester took an olive, bit it, and watched Helen, hinting and bridling as she held the center of the stage. Now, it was true that, amongst a mass of letters he had found in Box 1711, one morning, forwarded from Peever's publishing house, there had been a sentimental note from Mrs. Willyer. As the audience pleaded with her for more light, he tried to recall just what he had written in answer. To the best of his knowledge it had run about like this:

"*My dear Mrs. Willyer:*

"I am sincerely grateful to you for your appreciation of my work, and thank you for your kindness in telling me of it."

But if the scene was comic to him, Pauline, by what he could read of her face, found it

tragic. So darkly did she regard her dear friend Helen that, when the guests had gone, he could not forbear to remark, easily,

"I say, Helen Willyer looked well to-night, did n't she? Almost beautiful."

"Beautiful!" replied Pauline with asperity, "I thought she looked like a fright. I never saw her so unbecomingly dressed!"

What more she thought was evidenced next day in her letter to John Irons:

"Who *are* you! I simply *must* know — I *must* see you. I don't care whether you are deaf or dumb or blind, a cripple or deformed, red, black, or yellow. I can't bear it not to have you write — Oh, I must see you — I must!"

The letter left him cold. Her pride, of course, had been piqued, that was all. She was envious and feared that Helen would capture the hero of the hour.

And, since as a lover he had failed to win her, why pursue the correspondence further as a celebrity to please her vanity? No. He sat down to finish her off with a last letter in the grand manner. If Pauline *would* take the

bit in her teeth and try to run away with him, he would have to steer her toward the brink of a chasm so deep that she would simply have to stop, a precipice she would never dare to jump. Pauline was proud of her position, her name, and fame. A little spoiled, of course, she was. Her head was turned, but was still well set on her shoulders — no danger of her losing it for a man she had tossed aside so cavalierly — a man absolutely unknown to her. That scandal and disgrace was impossible for Mrs. Lester, much less for Mrs. Pauline Hope.

And so, with one of those crafty smiles a husband, be he never so much in love, sometimes indulges in, secretly, he sat down to end the romance beyond recall.

"*My dear Pauline:*

"Yes, I will meet you; but only on one condition. 'I love you' are ordinarily silly, meaningless words. What I mean by them is that, if I cannot be first, the only one in your life, I prefer to be nothing. But, if you are ready to give up everything, yes, I mean it, everything — your husband, your home, your comfort, your reputation, and face the world

with me — then set your own time and place and I shall be there and, whatever may come, ready to protect you always. If not, then this is

The End."

This rash epistle he sent by special delivery; when he reached home he knew it must already have been delivered. Pauline, however, showed no sign of excitement; seldom had he seen her so calm. Undoubtedly she had given up all hope of attaching John Irons's scalp to her belt. Well, he thought, thank heaven, the sorry farce which had kept him so long in a fool's paradise was now played out. He and Pauline would jog on together; and she would never know.

He was, next morning, searching absent-mindedly for some court-plaster in her chamber, when the half-opened door of a closet where she kept her hats caught his eye. Something (why, *that* was n't like a hat!) in the shadow (what were those brown things — *roses?*) attracted him.

Nearer, he saw, attached to the withered, discolored flowers, a card: "Finis. J. I."

He stared at it uncomprehending, then — he could n't quite believe it — but, yes, they were the same. His roses! So *that* was what had become of them — she had kept them! Then he had won! He had won! Pauline loved him! He rejoiced. But no, not him, either; she loved John Irons. He sickened. But he *was* John Irons — yes, he *must* rejoice! John Irons must win that he might win as Lester Hope.

Slowly he walked downstairs and, hesitating, stopped at the library door. Through the slit of the portières he saw her bending over her desk, writing — she was smiling, transfigured.

No, not for many, many months had he seen that once-familiar look of youth and romantic love. With that happy, rapt expression, why, she might have been Pauline-of-the-Violets! How often, writing to her in his office, he had longed for a vision of that mysterious inner self of hers, for a glimpse underneath the mask she always wore, now, when they were together.

Well, there, at last, she was — not his wife — his secret correspondent. He knew that she

was writing to John Irons. He knew that she cared for John Irons. But that he himself was John Irons, try as he might, somehow he could n't feel. To him, also, John Irons was a ghost.

Lost in that reverie, he had scarce time to escape before she had risen and was coming toward him. As the chameleon changes, somewhere between that table and that door she changed; and it was now Mrs. Hope, Mrs. Pauline Hope, who found him in the dining-room, and, smiling calmly, handed him a letter. For a moment he stared at her, wondering that women could thrive, yes, and grow fair in an atmosphere of duplicity that would suffocate a man.

"D' you mind mailing this letter for me, Lester?" she said, placidly. "I 've just written to that mysterious Irons person —" she hesitated —"about his book. Every one 's talking about him so, I do hope I can find out who he is. He may answer *me*. Don't put it in your pocket now, and forget it!"

He did not put it in his pocket. He did not forget it. Once safe out of sight and he was reading:

"*My dear J. I.:*

"You know I am romantic; I always was. I always shall be, I suppose. And so it makes me feel appallingly grown up to have to say it, but what you ask is really quite too rash — yes, it 's too romantic even for romantic me. As a writer, I simply adore the idea; it 's delicious. But as a flesh-and-blood woman of twenty-eight, living on West Seventy-second Street, New York City, in this year of our Lord, well, the plan won't quite stand up straight, exactly; it tumbles over in my mind.

"And then, it is n't quite fair, is it, J. I.? You say you have seen me, but I have never seen you. To be sure mentally, even spiritually, I do feel that I know you rather better than most women know their husbands, at least better than I do mine — and yet, as you say, you are not a phantom. You are a man. There 's no doubt about that, after your wonderful book! An actual, face-to-face meeting — well, it does have, you must admit, possibilities for surprise — as great possibilities as a first letter from a man you 've known all your life! And it takes so little to destroy an illusion! Not that I 'm afraid — I 'm not a

bit afraid; but still I *hope* you won't insist on an unconditional surrender in advance. I respect you, I admire you beyond words — but whether I love you or not I *can't* say till I see you — and if I could, I would n't. There! If you do love me as you say, trust me. Let 's just see what will happen when the curtain rises on you and

"PAULINE."

But already those roses, those old, faded roses, had reassured him, warmed him toward her. Slight evidence, perhaps, of her sincerity, but it gave him a welcome excuse for believing her letter. He was sure at least that she was not merely tuft-hunting. And if he had not succeeded in winning her acknowledged love — (the thing was impossible, he saw that, now) — he had at least, as John Irons, reëstablished the old relation of mental equality and *camaraderie*. That much, then, he would accept as his victory. And so now, to have the mystery over, he would explode his bomb and blow the romance to bits.

He wired her merely, "How? When? Where?" Her answer came post haste the same afternoon.

"*My dear J. I.:*

"Oh, I knew that if you really loved me you would be magnanimous. And the only way to prove that I appreciate your self-denial is to acknoweldge now what I never dared to express before. I wrote you once that you had fascinated me, but what I did n't write was that long before our correspondence was cut short I knew quite well that I was dangerously near falling in love with you. Indeed, I ended it all only because I was afraid — it was too dangerous. Did n't you understand? I simply could n't bear the deceit — I felt too ashamed and guilty. That was why I forbade you to write any more — it seemed impossible to risk the consequences of letting myself go, but you will never know what a struggle with myself that decision cost me. Then I tried to forget you; but I did n't, I could n't. I felt perfectly lost without your letters. And now your book has prevented my ever being able to forget you. It has affected me so that it is more dangerous than ever for us to meet — but, meet you I shall. I have to. I must know who you are!"

There was, in postscript, an address where he might meet her — he recognized it as the Willyer's apartment, and remembered that the Willyers were away. The next evening at nine!

Now he was in for it. And now, at last, he was all John Irons, rejoicing in his success. Lester Hope could wait. As John Irons he would win, and then —

That night Lester dined alone, not knowing what he ate, and went to a theater, not knowing what he saw. He left, next morning, without having seen Pauline. Little work was done, that day, at the office of Lester Hope, Attorney-at-Law. He was too busy preparing for the death of John Irons. After to-morrow night his rival would be no more.

VII

IN somewhat the mood of one who, with ticket ready and trunks strapped, sits waiting, with a little useless time on his hands, before the carriage calls to take him to the train, Lester Hope in the library was attempting rather unsuccessfully to read the evening paper. It was his own thoughts rather than the gathering dusk that prevented him.

Pauline, when he had come in, was not at home; but he had since heard her enter and go upstairs. He did not call to her, but waited patiently, or impatiently, for dinner to be announced. It promised to be rather interesting, he thought, that dinner with a wife on the eve of her clandestine meeting with a lover. It would be an occasion not many husbands had the opportunity and fewer still the desire of anticipating.

A quick click of the curtain rings aroused him from his reverie. "Are you there, Lester?"

Pauline, entering, switched on the electric light. The tall library clock was just then striking seven. Lester dropped his paper and watched her. What feminine casuistry would she use to explain her absence to-night, he wondered; or would she indeed vouchsafe to explain it at all?

"I 'm going to dine out with — that is, I 've got a little dinner to-night." That was all; except that she showed some curiosity as to whether or not he was to be at home this evening.

No, this evening, Lester was thinking of going out himself.

For a while she stood, absorbed in her thoughts. Her gloves seemed to require considerable buttoning. Then she took up a tulip from a bowl. Now, to most persons the odor of a tulip is far from fragrant; but, by the way Pauline smelled of this one, it might have been a lily-of-the-valley.

"Will you be home early?" she asked finally.

Lester could n't say. Would Pauline?

The tulip was thrown aside; she stood silently while the clock ticked six or seven sec-

onds. Then, gazing down at the open fire, she replied quietly, "Would you care very much if I never came home, Lester?" And then, dropping into a chair, she turned to him to watch the effect of her words.

"What d' you mean?" He knew, of course, just what she meant, but her unexpected candor had surprised him. Somehow, he had n't counted on her compunction. "My dear Pauline," he said, "if you have anything to tell me, I think I shall be able to stand it. You need n't think you have to break it to me gently, you know."

There was a long, long pause, while she sat, her chin in her gloved hand, looking at him steadfastly.

"Lester," she began, "you know we once promised each other that if either of us ever changed toward the other — oh, Lester, you know what I mean, don't you? — that we 'd be honest, and that we 'd tell the other?"

He helped her out only with a nod.

"It is n't so much that I 've changed toward you, dear, as that I 've changed all over. I 'm not the girl you married any more, Lester; I 'm not Pauline Forr; I 'm Pauline Hope, now

"I've—Oh, it's sickening to have to tell you, but—I've fallen in love, Lester—at least I think I have"

— and I 've gone on — I 'm different. You can't create and not — well, I don't know, something changes you. It 's a different world, the artist's. Oh, I can't explain it, Lester — you would n't understand."

Her egoism was so beautifully blind that he missed the sting in her reproach. It had only a grim humor. Consolingly the words of "Alice in Wonderland" came to him, and he thought, "'The less there is of mine, the more there is of yours,' John Irons!"

"And, Lester, there 's something else I 've got to tell you. It 's extraordinary, it 's wild and rash, I suppose — but I can't help it." With pity, she hesitated before she dealt the blow. "I 've — oh, it 's sickening to have to tell you, but — I 've fallen in love, Lester — at least I think I have — I 'm afraid I have — with some one else. I don't know — I can't explain it even to myself, but I — well, you 'll be awfully surprised, Lester — it 's John Irons!"

"John Irons!" Lester repeated stupidly.

"Yes, John Irons. And the impossible part, the mad part, of it is that I 've never even seen him — at least to my knowledge."

Now what would a surprised and jealous husband naturally do, Lester wondered uneasily, to express his emotion? Rage and rail, break down and weep, slay her with withering contempt? And yet, how could he feign such a part when he was so distracted by that baffling Siamese-twin feeling of combined victory and defeat? Engrossed by it, he almost forgot to speak. The occasion certainly called for some display of feeling, but all he could do was to nod like a mandarin gravely and remark, "Oh, yes; I do recall his having written you a letter once." How flat it fell! But it was the best he could do.

It did n't matter. Pauline was too excited by her own confession to listen; and while Lester wondered why he did n't himself confess and end it all, he was held entranced by the grotesqueness of the situation and the nervousness with which she was pouring out: "He 's written me many letters. I never told you, because — well, because I was in love with him, I suppose. His letters 'got' me, just as his book 'got' the public. Oh, I suppose it sounds strange, but letters do reveal so much! They tell things, sometimes that are always

hidden when one meets face to face. One can know a person for years sometimes and never find out what one letter will betray. Oh, you know how I used to be thrilled by your letters, Lester, more thrilled, often, than when I was with you. I was a young girl then; I don't know how they 'd be now — you never write me letters like that, any more. Oh, Lester "— the tears had come into her eyes — "I know you won't believe it and I can't explain, but really I love you, dear, just as much as ever! Really I do, Lester. That 's the inexplicable part of it all — it does n't seem to take away anything of my feeling for you. Don't think I ever can forget those wonderful days we 've had together, dear — only, I 'm afraid I care for him more, somehow, at least in a different way. I mean — he 's just like another you, somehow, only more so — like you in evening dress, or a romantic costume, or you in another incarnation."

She was getting a bit hysterical; Lester's very impassivity seemed to drive her on. "When I saw that I was getting too interested in him I tried to stop it, Lester. In fact, I did stop it. I did n't hear from him for months and months.

And then — oh, if he had n't written that wonderful, terrible book! I could n't bear it! It just talked to me — it took hold of me — it dragged me, dragged me! It 's no use my trying to resist him, I can't, I can't!"

She looked up at him desperately. "Lester, I 'm going to see him to-night. I feel as if I knew him, through his letters and his book, as well as I know you, better, even; and yet I can't be absolutely sure whether I really love him or not till I have actually seen him. But I could n't go on without telling you, Lester; it did n't seem fair, because, Lester, if he *is* what I think he is — well, it will be like touching a match to gunpowder, I suppose — I don't know what may happen. It may mean —"

She stood looking at him for a moment, her eyes wet. Then, as he tried vainly to make up his mind to tell her before it was too late, she was kneeling beside him and she was clasping his hands and she was pleading: "Won't you kiss me, Lester? Just one kiss for — for what we *have* been to each other?"

He kissed her somehow; somehow she left him. Through the dull blue portières he saw her go. . . . Then, not till then, did the inhibi-

tion of his will for a moment relax. Up he jumped and followed her, reaching the hall just as the front door closed. But open it and call her he could not. . . . He walked back to the library . . .

What now? What should he do? The clock struck half-past seven.

Too late, he saw the dilemma he was in. How could he meet her at nine o'clock! Go to that rendezvous as her lover, only for her to find — her husband? And she was expecting a match to her gunpowder. Never! Could she, could any woman, bear such a banal anti-climax at the very crisis of her secret, long-nourished romance? Put the picturesque, chivalrous ideal, the "wonderful" John Irons she had created (with what wealth of fervent fancy, he could well imagine) into the plodding shoes of a commonplace lawyer — the blue worsted coat and pantaloons of a man she saw every day, talked with, ate with? No!

Pacing the floor, back and forth, back and forth, pacing, he argued it. But if he did *not* go — what then? No excuse whatever for John Irons's absence to-night was ade-

quate; even if it were, would n't it only postpone the difficulty? No; more and more he felt it impossible to tell her the truth. And yet — Pauline waiting for a lover who never came! How could he so humiliate her, end it all so miserably? Was there no other way?

So Lester Hope sought desperately for some means of avoiding the issue. So all the while he knew that he would not, could not, ever confess. . . . The clock struck eight . . . half-past. . . . Still irresolute, he struggled with his predicament, until he awoke from his absorption with a start. The clock was striking nine! His very indecision had decided it for him; it was too late.

Decided it for him, yes; but what about poor Pauline, a mile away, waiting? Something must be done, and be done immediately to spare her further mortification. No more time for thought, now; the affair must be settled irrevocably. Thank God, one resource was left — that modern magic ever at hand to protect the shame of the coward.

In an instant he was at the telephone; he called up Helen Willyer's apartment. A mo-

ment of distressing suspense, then her frightened, anxious, "Hello!"

No need to disguise his voice; his emotion did that for him. "Is this Mrs. Hope?" Surely she would never recognize that strange, husky tone.

"Pauline? . . . It 's John Irons . . . Yes, John Irons! I can't come . . . No, I can't meet you at all, I can't even explain. I can never come — never! . . . Good-by!"

The 'phone clicked. Their romance was over. Whether he had killed or wounded, he did n't know; but he felt exactly as if he had shot somebody. Well, John Irons at least was dead. No one ever would know who he was, now, or what had become of him.

Tick, tick, tick, tick — the library clock ticked on while, unlocking a lower drawer of his desk, Lester Hope looked in, as into a new-made grave. There — never again! — there they were, her letters. That was all he had of her, now — all he ever would have to solace his loneliness. . . . One envelope he took out abstractedly, and opened. It was the letter about his book. . . . Tick, tick, tick, tick —

the clock ticked on as he sat there, reading — dreaming. . . . "Women still love to be mastered" . . . "At least, I do, anyway!" . . . "That 's the surest way to be happy, as I know, full well!" . . .

Suddenly startled, he threw the letters back into the drawer — just in time. He jumped up; and, as he stood there as if dreading a ghost, she was before him — Pauline, in a gap of the portières.

Which of the two was the whiter, the more haggard? A sense of intolerable guilt unnerved him; he trembled. He was the conscience-stricken sportsman; she the bird with a broken wing.

"Well, I 've come back, Lester," she said simply. "That is, if —" wearily she dropped down upon the couch, "that is, if you 'll let me. . . ." She sat apathetic, her eyes on the floor. . . . "He did n't come."

Lester's eyes, too, were on the floor. If he could only have put his arm about her, kissed her, assured her of his devotion, made up in some way for her disappointment — but he was numb, dazed. He tried to think of something to comfort her — nothing came. For a

"Where did you get this?" Pauline was demanding

while there was no sound in the room but the ticking of the clock . . . tick — tick — tick. . . .

More wretched now from the pain he had caused her than he had ever been from his own suffering, he waited in silence, feeling shamefully inadequate to the situation. The sportsman can kill his wounded bird outright and put it out of its misery; but Lester Hope dared not act. Nervously, to brace his courage, he kept saying to himself, "No, she must never learn the truth; it is ghastly, but she will recover in time." Whatever happened he would let her at least keep the memory of her romance inviolate, a poetic mystery to the end.

After a while she roused herself and said, languidly, "Lester, would you mind getting me a glass of milk? I feel faint. I haven't had any dinner. I couldn't eat."

Glad of any excuse for action he left her, her eyes still fixed on the floor . . .

A few minutes later — in the doorway: Lester Hope had stopped suddenly, transfixed. A glass had fallen from his fingers with a crash.

"Where did you get this?" Pauline was

demanding. She was standing by his desk; in her hand was a pale blue envelope — one of her own letters to John Irons. It had dropped upon the floor, undoubtedly, when he had thrown the others into the drawer.

"Did John Irons give you this letter?"

No answer.

"Do you know John Irons?"

No answer. But in his countenance was something that made her stare and stare at him. And her face, too, like his, was changing, changing, and her eyes were as if she were watching the crumbling of a year's illusions. Then suddenly they fired as she made the desperate jump at an unthinkable conclusion. "*You* are John Irons!"

He started to speak, hesitated. But there was little need to confess, corroboration was in his face. "Did *you* write those letters to me, Lester Hope? Did you, *did* you? Tell me!"

As he tried to put his arm about her she avoided him, crouching away as if he were something dreadful, and made her way to the door. One bewildered, incredulous look, and she was gone. Up the stairs he heard her stumbling; then, above, a door slammed.

Below Lester Hope stood, his eyes fixed on the letter, then gradually he awoke, his mind insurgent. It was all so stupid, so unreal, so unnecessary! After all, why were they both suffering so? A violent revulsion of feeling swept over him — indignant revolt — an imperious mandate of common sense. Lawyer or novelist, invisible or in blue worsted suit, still he *was* John Irons. Husband or ghost, was n't he her lover? Good God, he had won her, had n't he? Why the devil did n't he take her? Why fear a bugaboo anticlimax? He had kissed her with passion before this, why should she shrink from him now? There she was, right upstairs; what was he doing down here? — fool!

"Women still love to be mastered — at least I do, anyway." Why, was n't it in that very letter he had just been reading? *"That 's the surest way to be happy!"* Take her at her word, fool — *be* happy! The morbid fantasy he had built from his diseased pride fell to pieces. An abnormal mental tension was miraculously freed in his brain; his spirits soared, soared, skylarking.

But already he was running upstairs, two

steps at a time, and now his hand was on the knob of her door. Locked.

"Pauline!" he cried, "let me in!"

There was no reply.

"*Pauline!*" This time it was a command, in virile vermilion.

Pauline, half-dressed, clutching a white kimona about her, opened the door and looked out at him with frightened eyes. It was long since she had heard that compelling tone.

In strode Lester Hope, confident and jubilant, and smiled as for long he had not smiled, at his wife.

The achievement of success is like climbing a hill. Once at the top, and lo, a new mental prospect shines beyond. Mrs. Hope's Husband had reached at last the summit of his endeavor, and there, meeting him over the ridge he found — himself. Oh, positive enough, now, was Lester Hope. He was so sure of himself that he could play with the situation, play with Pauline, yes, and play comedy. In his voice was the laughter of victory.

"Mrs. Lester Hope," he announced, "I 've decided to appeal your case. I have won you once, and lost you. I have won you twice, and

lost you. But now, by the Wingèd Victory of Samothrace, I 'm going to win you for the third time. I intend to take your case up to the Supreme Court!"

He seized that darling defendant in his arms and held her close. "And I am now going to show you," he informed her, "what I know about the Supreme Courtship!"

But Pauline was pushing him away. "Wait! Wait a minute," she was crying; and then, with her two hands on his shoulders, she gazed long, long into his eyes.

"John Irons!" It was scarcely audible. And then —"*You* wrote those letters! *You* — wrote — that — book!"

And as she looked, looked, over her rapt face there passed admiration, contrition, anger, amusement, disappointment, delight — a rainbow of emotions refracted from the white light of revelation.

She sighed, "Well, in the last ten minutes I 've thought out ten whole months," she went on, "and I want to tell you, Lester Irons," and now there was no mood on her face but joy, "that I have n't changed my mind one bit about that self-satisfied little chit of a heroine

of yours. I hate her — just hate her! And I still insist that if I had been your hero, I would have jolly well boxed her ears! Is it too late now, Les?"

It was Pauline-of-the-Violets who was speaking to him; it was Pauline-of-the-Violets who was smiling at him so mischievously.

But, temptingly though she leaned to him, he did not box those ears. Instead —

. . . . . .

The case of "Irons vs. Hope" was not a long contest, however, the two parties to the suit — the blue worsted suit — soon arriving at a happy arrangement. After the Agreement was duly signed and sealed — some time after — Pauline smiled whimsically up into his eyes.

"I suppose I am a very bad woman," she said. "After being married to the nicest and cleverest man in the world, I have had two lovers. But it is n't every bad woman who can say, can she, Lester, that she has been in love three times, and each time with her own husband!"

VIII

IT was Mrs. Woodling's lifelong regret that "John Irons" refused to disclose his identity until his second book had been published. "And a second book," she confided, with raised eyebrows and a Woodling smile, "is usually *such* a drop after an initial success." Considerable satisfaction it was to this professional hostess nevertheless, to sustain her reputation as a lion-hunter by being the first, the very first, to present the latest popular author to the public in flesh and blood and swallow-tail.

He had insisted (genius is always eccentric, Mrs. Woodling well knew,— and how she loved it!)— that he be presented still as "John Irons"; and, standing beside his proud, smiling wife, he was so introduced to flattering fools who had once ignored him as "Mrs. Hope's Husband." To the unillumined his real name was whispered behind Mrs. Woodling's bediamonded fingers; at which her prize exhibit felt

even queerer than he had when, coming home one evening, he had found the Irish night-watchman sitting on his front steps reading "The Book of Pride."

Yielding to Pauline's insistent fond demand, he endured it, however, for this one ridiculous evening only, and did his best to enjoy the comedy, accepting with an ironic grace the exaggerated reward paid, in such salons as this, to literary achievement. Over bare shoulders, past heads tousled and heads bald, through the brilliant shifting whirl of wealth and talent, style and beauty gaily chattering, his eyes roved, meanwhile, toward the dim outer regions, limbos of hall and library and the smoky refuge of the billiard room, questing a familiar expression on the faces of bored husbands. One or two such countenances assuaged his own ordeal.

To Pauline, on the contrary, the affair, with its lights and laughter was all solemn earnest. She glowed at the "fascinatings" and "charmings" and other adulatory adjectives bestowed upon his novel by sweet young things, low-necked, even as a mother listens to the praise of an only child. Eyes burning, uncon-

scious even of her own pearls, she looked up at him, so handsome and distinguished, as every woman with a third lover looks at him, caring not who may witness her infatuation.

Towards the end of the evening, a last, late-arriving lady was presented to Mr. "John Irons."

She was a round-eyed matron in black satin. She was as soft and silly as only a huge woman in black satin can be. At the author of the hour near-sighted Mrs. Poppity let her sentimentality gush copiously forth, unwitting that it had ever gushed at him before. Finally she turned; and as her round eyes rolled toward the wife of the newest celebrity, slowly her fan swayed back and forth — back and forth, her ostrich fan.

"A — h!" in her wistful, far-away tone she breathed, never once looking at Pauline's face, "and what do *you* do, Mrs. Irons?" Then, waiting for no answer, soulfully she added, "something *won*-derful, I 'm sure!"

THE END

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